

WATCHING OUT FOR UNBELIEF & HARDNESS OF HEART

Speaker: Prof. Joseph John

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Scripture: Exodus 17: 1-7

Two weeks ago, we had meditated on trusting God in difficult times. And last week, Abhishek shared from Psalm 13 on a similar theme – how David faced difficult times. I strongly feel that this is something we go through almost on a day-to-day basis. So I have entitled today's meditation 'Watching out for unbelief and hardness of heart.

When we meditated on trusting God in difficult times, we learned two major lessons.

- i. God has a plan and purpose for all that we go through. Therefore, we should never lose that perspective whenever we face tough times. We should remember that God knows and God has planned it.
- ii. We also have a part. we need to work on our negative attitudes on a day-to-day basis and God's Spirit would help us through God's word, especially through the wonderful promises God has given us so that we don't lose hope. I'm sure that all of us realize that hardships and difficult times are going to be there till the day of our death. We can wish them not to be there, but they will be with us all the time.

But the important thing is to remember that God allows these hardships to mold us into the person that God has planned for us. I think that's something very important for us to do.

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 quarrelled 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, "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.

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 quarrelled and because they tested the Lord saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

This particular incident is very important, so much so that it's quoted twice more in the Bible, and we'll see all those portions briefly. What we need to learn from this is the kind of response by the Israelites to this particular problem, and how we can avoid some of their negative attitudes.

v. 1 we saw that they travelled from place to place under the Lord's direction. While all this was happening, the Lord was directing them – when to start, when to stop. The problem was that there was no water for the people to drink.

v. 2 They quarrelled with Moses whose immediate reply was: “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the Lord to the test?” Why did he say that? We saw 2 chapters back which we considered 2 weeks ago, that each time they had a problem, God solved the problem. So that’s why Moses was telling them: Why do you put the Lord to the test?

Now, being a desert, the most important need is water. Do you think God did not know that they need water? If God was guiding them on a day-to-day basis, when to go, where to go, where to stay? If God was concerned with that amount of detail, do you think God was not interested in water for them? That’s the mistake they made, and that’s why Moses was asking them why they put the Lord to the test.

v. 3 But they were thirsty and they grumbled against Moses. As usual, their standard rhetoric. They said, “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?” You would see this kind of a response from them all the time. any and every time the Israelites faced a problem, you would get some comment like this. They were so negative they could only think that God somehow brought them here so that they could die. That’s the kind of low perspective they had about God and His plan for them. That’s so sad.

v. 4 Moses was really scared. Moses said, “They are almost ready to stone me.” Ultimately, they are of the opinion that Moses is the reason behind all this. “We were very comfortable in Egypt and he brought us here.”

v. 6 God gives the answer as always, whenever they had a problem. In spite of all their grumbling and quarrelling, God always took care. “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.”

v. 7 And Moses called the place Massah and Meriba because the Israelites quarrelled and because they tested the Lord saying, “Is the Lord among us or not.” Because they did not get water, they ask: Is the Lord among us or not? When they said this, right above them was a pillar of cloud and the previous night, a pillar of fire reminding them of God’s presence. God’s presence was with them all the time, and that’s the sad part. Massah means to test and Meriba means contention or quarrelling. For Moses, this must have been a terrible kind of incident so much so that this particular incident is quoted twice more. Massah and Meriba – whenever you hear these words Massah and Meriba, you remember this particular incident.

Now we must admit that the problem they went through was genuine. But as we said, each time they had a problem, God had taken care. The problem with them was that they were not patient; they were not willing. They were putting the Lord to the test and they started this kind of murmuring.

But the lesson for us is the way Moses faced the problem. Look at Moses’ life. For the first 40 years, he was brought up in the palace of Pharaoh, and we know that he was a proud man, and thought himself as a leader. We see how God dealt with him so much so that God drove him away. For the next 40 years, he was in a training ground as a shepherd taking care of sheep. But at the end of those 40 years, Moses came to a very important conclusion – that he was good for nothing.

And that’s the time God called him. But as you see in Exodus chs. 3 & 4, Moses keeps on making excuses. When God said, “I have chosen you to lead My people out of Egypt to take them to the Promised Land,,” Moses had lots of excuses. Let me read God’s answer to some of them. When Moses said that it was almost impossible for him, God’s answer in Exodus 3:12 was, “I will be with

you.” In other words, I am going to be there with you, therefore, there is not going to be any problem.

Exodus 4:12 God said “I will help you speak and teach you what to say.” This was in reply to Moses’ excuse of being unable to speak well. This is where I find God’s humour – choosing a stammering leader who cannot speak well. Just to say that it’s not about you and all about God. That’s the best part.

Moses had a very simple but profound strategy for all these problems. When I have a problem, I go to God and cry out. We want very complicated solutions for all our problems. We don’t want simple answers. But Moses had a very simple solution. Every problem that he had, he cried out. Even when all this murmuring happened, Moses went back to God and cried, “Lord, what should I do? And God had a solution.

Why did I share this? The same thing is applicable to us. each time we face a problem, the first thing we need to do is do just what Moses did. Go back to God. Quieten yourself, quieten your heart, ask God: Lord, I am facing this problem. What should I do? I tell you, God would give you clarity. God will give you peace of mind and tell you what to do. I think that is the one of the most important lessons we see here. Think of a man like Moses leading a group of people grumbling all the time. You don’t ever see them being thankful.

We wonder why God allows all these problems in our life. I can think of about three reasons.

1. Each time a problem comes to us, God is reminding us that God is bigger than all our problems. Sometimes we feel that our problems are bigger than God, and that is a very wrong perspective. God is bigger than all our problems and that’s something God wants us to learn, that He is in control and He can take care.
2. God was preparing this nation of Israel. He wanted them to be a godly nation so that they are a blessing to everyone. Similarly, each time you face a problem, remember that God’s hand is with you, His presence is there and He is preparing you for something much greater. All of us, me included, have very low expectations about ourselves. That’s the problem. We have some idea about our capabilities, what we can or cannot do. Based on that, we have some plan about our future. Sometimes we go to career counselling to found out our strengths and weaknesses. There’s nothing wrong with that, but the problem is that all this assumes it’s all about us and not about God.

But God has far greater plans for our life than we can ever imagine. But God has a process. We are not ready yet. Think of Moses. He thought he was a leader, but he was not ready. Therefore, God had to prepare him. He had to make him a shepherd – 40 tough years. so much so that at the end of it he was convinced that he was not a leader. And that’s the time God could use him. And what a leader he was! Even today management books use Moses’ example as an amazing leader. That’s what God can do for each one of us sitting here. However, you will never accomplish that in your own strength. Never! Allowing God to work in your life means that God has to prepare you, sometimes take you through tough times.

We will talk about some of the things which we can do when we go through tough times and one of them is to bless the Lord. We can thank Him. That’s something the nation of Israel missed out even though they were being blessed. They never remembered that. let’s remember that we have 10,000 things to thank the Lord for.

This particular incident is quoted at least twice later. One such portion is in Psalm 95. The first two-thirds of this psalm is a call to worship the Lord. Let’s read a few of the verses.

Psalms 95: 3-7

³ *For the Lord is the great God,
the great King above all gods.*
⁴ *In His hand are the depths of the earth,
and the mountain peaks belong to Him.*
⁵ *The sea is His, for he made it,
and His hands formed the dry land.*
⁶ *Come, let us bow down in worship,
let us kneel before the Lord our Maker;*
⁷ *for He is our God
and we are the people of His pasture,
the flock under His care."*

That's something we should never forget, that we are under His care. He is our shepherd; we are the sheep under His care. All the time, therefore, if we are under God's care, then it's God's business to take care of us.

Let us read vs. 8-11 which is an analysis of Massah and Meribah. That's God's interpretation of what happened and what the problem was.

Today, if only you would hear his voice,
⁸ *"Do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah,
as you did that day at Massah in the wilderness,*
⁹ *where your ancestors tested me;
they tried me, though they had seen what I did.*
¹⁰ *For forty years I was angry with that generation;
I said, 'They are a people whose hearts go astray,
and they have not known my ways.'*
¹¹ *So I declared on oath in my anger,
'They shall never enter my rest.'"*

Let's unpack some of the truths mentioned in v. 8 "Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts." One of the biggest problems they had was they had hardened hearts. Then it says, "Where your fathers tested and tried me though they had seen what I did." They had seen what God did but still they tested and tried Him, and God was angry with that generation for 40 years. Why is 40 years mentioned there? Notice that even when they were about to enter Canaan, and they had the problem of water, you see the same bitterness and grumbling. For 40 years God had guided them, still they have not learned the lesson. Later in v. 10 it says, "They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they have not known My ways."

We see 3 problems here:

- Hardened hearts – they were not sensitive or willing to listen or learn.
- Unbelief. Even though they had seen what God did, they tested and tried God. They had the cloud over them, shielding them from the hot sun; yet they were grumbling. They were not willing to believe.
- Hearts going astray.

All these were heart issues. When the Bible talks about the heart, what it means is our core, our inner value systems. All our inner security or what we long for or what we aspire for – that's the heart.

Now we saw that they always wanted to go back to Egypt even though God had set them free. Sometimes we can have that kind of an attitude. We can be so ungrateful, and we can forget all that God did in our lives. We can look back and put our own plans in place instead of God's big plans.

Another major issue is that you don't ever see them genuinely repenting of their unbelief. If they genuinely repented, God would have healed them of their unbelief.

THREE LESSONS FOR US TO LEARN.

1. We cannot do this on our own strength.

None of the positive thinking, or all the self-help books will be able to help us. The important thing is, if we allow God's Spirit to guide us, He can change us. Each one of us sitting here who has received the Lord Jesus in our hearts, has God's Spirit residing permanently in our hearts. But there is a problem. God's Spirit is the gentlest person you can think about. His Spirit will never force Himself on us. We have to surrender. We need to say, "Lord, here I am. Guide me," then God can take care.

We need to work on our hearts, our thoughts and our inner attitudes. Each time something negative comes, when we face a problem, we need to say, "Stop! I will not allow such thoughts." Therefore today, if you are going through unbelief or hardening of heart, remember that we are primarily responsible for it. We allow ourselves to brood on all those things and allow it to control us. Instead we should reach out to God and surrender, and God can help us.

David, in Psalm 51, has a beautiful prayer which could be a prayer for us on a day-to-day basis.

Psalm 51:10 "Create in me a pure heart, O God; renew a steadfast spirit within me."

When you say pure, the meaning here is unadulterated. David is praying for an unadulterated heart. Likewise, we need to watch out for the kind of thoughts which go through our heart especially unbelief and hardening. We need to remind ourselves that God is good all the time, whatever happens. That's an area in which Satan always attacks us. When something wrong happens in our life, the first question we have is: Why did God allow this? If He is God, why did this happen? That's when we need to say: God is good. God has a purpose for me. We need to assure ourselves that nothing in our life is going to happen without God's knowledge and permission. These are areas where we need to help ourselves.

How do we know that all that is happening in our life is with God's knowledge and permission?

Psalm 139 is a wonderful psalm where we see this aspect of our God being an omniscient God, an all-knowing God. The first 12 verses of this psalm talk about God's knowledge of everything we do including our thoughts. Nothing is hidden. If God knows even our thoughts, it can be both comforting and also scary. He knows everything that is going through my mind. Even before the Pharisees talked to Jesus, He knew what was going on in their mind, and He answered them. God knows everything!

vs. 13-18 talks about the entire period of our life even before our birth.

¹³For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.

¹⁴I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful,
I know that full well.

¹⁶Your eyes saw my unformed body;

all the days ordained for me were written in your book
before one of them came to be.
¹⁷How precious to me are your thoughts, God!
How vast is the sum of them!
¹⁸Were I to count them,
they would outnumber the grains of sand—
when I awake, I am still with you.”

v. 14 says “I am fearfully and wonderfully made.” Each one of us sitting here must remember that anytime you are tempted to look down on yourself, that you are fearfully and wonderfully made. That’s the kind of God we have. v. 16 says, “Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in Your book before one of them came to be.” Can you believe that? Everything that is going to happen till the day of our death is already recorded in God’s book. That’s the kind of God we have. all He is asking us is to trust and surrender, so that God can take us through all those routes, both tough times and good times.

v. 17 says, “How precious to me are Your thoughts, God!” Do you like that God is thinking about you each and every minute through your day? God is thinking about you and His thoughts are precious. We talked about working on our hearts. These are the things which we need to ponder on.

2. Spend time meditating on God’s word and in prayer.

Reading through the psalms, when we see God’s care, God’s knowledge, and God’s providence, that should fill us and thrill us. God cares.

Psalms 139: 23-24

Search me, God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.

That’s something we could do every day. Lord, I come before You. Please search me, Lord. I can’t do it, but You search me and test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. If we allow God’s word to fill our thoughts and meditate on it, God’s Spirit would transform us on a day-to-day basis.

3. Fellowship of like-minded Christians.

We all need each other.

Hebrews 3: 7-11. The verses we read in Psalm 95: 8-11 are quoted almost verbatim here.

⁷So, as the Holy Spirit says:
“Today, if you hear his voice,
⁸ do not harden your hearts
as you did in the rebellion,
during the time of testing in the desert,
⁹ where your fathers tested and tried me,
though for forty years they saw what I did.
¹⁰That is why I was angry with that generation;
I said, ‘Their hearts are always going astray,
and they have not known my ways.’

¹¹So I declared on oath in my anger,
'They shall never enter my rest.' "

Now I want to bring to your notice v. 12 as a solution for the antidote for hardness of heart.

¹²See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. ¹³But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called "Today," so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. "

The solution for hardness of heart and unbelief is mentioned as encourage one another daily, as long as it is called 'today', so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. Each one of us needs encouragement. This means that each one of us sitting here has a responsibility to one another, to our fellow brothers and sisters in the Lord. Encouragement unfortunately is a rare commodity. If you think about it, at the end of the day, how many people encouraged you or appreciated you, you would seldom find somebody saying a good word. But we are commanded to encourage one another. So, when you meet with one another, ask what the person is going through. How are you encouraging? This is what we definitely need to do.

So the three lessons which could prevent us from having unbelief and hardening of heart.

- Work on our own inner negative attitudes and thoughts.
- Spending a good amount of time on meditating God's word and coming to the Lord in surrender and prayer. God will help us.
- Have fellowship with like-minded Christians.

May the Lord help us as we go through life, as we go through all these challenges. Lord, help us to come out of this test as Your dear children so that we would bring glory and honor to God.

Amen.