



Opening Prayer : Ever-living and ever-loving God, thank you for gathering us in your presence. When we walk through the wilderness and questions fill our hearts, remind us that you are still with us. Open our ears to hear your voice, our eyes to recognise your presence, and our hearts to receive your Word. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Hymn StF 628 – Faithful One, so unchanging

<https://youtu.be/JqK-UnsRTFI?si=JVLdy21u9A30VfJR>

Faithful one, so unchanging
 Ageless one, You're my rock of peace
 Lord of all I depend on You
 I call out to You, Again and again
 I call out to You, Again and again

You are my rock in times of trouble
 You lift me up when I fall down
 All through the storm, Your love is
 The anchor, My hope is in You alone

A prayer of praise and thanksgiving

God of the past and the present, we stand in awe and gratitude before you. When we complain, you don't condemn but confer on us fresh blessings. When our lives hit rocky places, you bring freshness and hope. When we feel your absence, you surprise us with your living presence, through the power of your Word, through the witness of your prophets and through your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prayer of Confession

Faithful God, so often we are like the Israelites, complaining to everyone around us as soon as things get tough and don't go our way, as soon as things don't turn out how we hoped or planned, as soon as things we want don't immediately appear.

Forgive us, we pray, and bless us with patience, faith and a quiet trust in your purposes for our lives. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Reading: Exodus 17:1-7(NIV)

The whole Israelite community set out from the Desert of Sin, travelling from place to place as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. 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?" 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?" Then Moses cried out to the Lord, "What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me." 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. 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. 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?"

Hymn StF 441 As water to the thirsty

https://youtu.be/AuZSgBjtB-A?si=XOr7_SyZa9fdFB1Q

As water to the thirsty,
 As beauty to the eyes,
 As strength that follows
 weakness,
 As truth instead of lies;
 As song-time and springtime
 And summertime to be,
 So is my Lord, my living Lord,
 So is my Lord to me.

Like calm in place of clamour
 Like peace that follows pain,
 Like meeting after parting,
 Like sunshine after rain;
 Like moonlight and starlight
 And sunlight on the sea,
 So is my Lord, my living Lord,
 So is my Lord to me.

As sleep that follows fever,
 As gold instead of grey,
 As freedom after bondage,
 As sunrise to the day;
 As home to the trav'ler
 And all he longs to see,
 So is my Lord, my living Lord,
 So is my Lord to me.

Sermon : Is the LORD among us or not?

“Is the LORD among us or not?” This question seems very simple. But it carries the weight of fear, frustration and fragility. It is a question asked by the Israelites. It is not an ancient question; it is a question that has travelled through generations.

“Is the LORD among us or not?”

The Israelites had been delivered from slavery in Egypt. In chapter 14, God opened the sea and led them through on dry ground. In chapter 15, when the water at Marah was bitter, God made it sweet to drink. In chapter 16, when they were hungry, God provided manna and quail. Again and again, God had guided and provided for them.

Then, in chapter 17, they came to a place called Rephidim. They had no water to drink. They began to quarrel with Moses, and their quarrelling became an accusation against Moses: “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” Moses cried out to God. God told him to take some of the elders and the staff with which he had struck the Nile. God said, “I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb.” Moses was to strike the rock, and water would come from it. Moses obeyed, and God provided water for the people. Moses named the place Massah and Meribah. Massah means testing, and Meribah means quarrelling or contention. Those names preserved the memory of what had happened there. Yet beneath their quarrelling and testing there was a question, and that question was:

“Is the LORD among us or not?”

Usually, questions demand answers. But this question itself gives us answers. What are those answers? That is what we are going to explore today.

The first answer we get from that question is that scarcity does not mean God’s absence

When the Israelites saw that there was no water, they concluded that God might not be among them.

We can easily do the same. When life goes wrong, and we cannot see the way ahead, we may ask, “Where is God now?” Rephidim teaches us that scarcity does not necessarily mean that God is absent. No water did not mean God was absent. But we need to remember that the wilderness was difficult, yet still part of the journey God was leading them on.

The thirst of the Israelites was genuine. Faith does not deny the empty cup. Faith refuses to conclude that the empty cup is the whole story. Sometimes we cannot see what God is doing. Sometimes the answer does not arrive when or how we expect. Yet the God who accompanied Israel through the sea was also present at the dry rock.

If you are in a season of scarcity today of resources, of strength, of answers remember this: the absence of water is not the absence of God. It may, in fact, be exactly where he is about to be found.

Let us look to the second answer that is God’s presence does not depend on our recognition

Here comes the naming the place becomes so important. Moses does not call it “the place where God failed to show up quickly enough.” He calls it Massah and Meribah — testing and quarrelling — because of the people’s behaviour, not because of any deficiency in God.

Verse 2 in Chapter 17: “Why do you put the Lord to test?” The demand for proof is entirely on the human side of this exchange. God is not on trial in this story. The people have put God on trial. And that distinction matters enormously, because it tells us something about the nature of doubt itself.

Scripture welcomes a kind of honest questioning; the psalmists do it constantly, crying “How long, O LORD?” But what happens at Rephidim is different in tone.

God does not begin to exist when we believe in God, and God does not cease to exist when we doubt. Human belief does not create God. God’s reality does not depend upon our approval, recognition or understanding.

It is like the sun, which does not depend on us opening our eyes to shine. But we need to open our eyes if we are to see its light. This turns the question to us. How often do we quietly demand that God re-prove himself to us? "Will God prove that God is here?" The question should be "Are we able to recognise and trust the God who is already among us?"

God's presence does not depend on our recognition, but we need to recognise and experience that presence.

Finally, the question answers to me that God answers human testing with surprising grace

The most surprising part of this passage is how God responds. The people quarrelled. They accused Moses. They tested God. Yet God did not abandon them. God gave them water. God said to Moses: "I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb."

These are remarkable words. The people had put God on trial. Normally, the accused person stands before the judge. But here God graciously says, "I will stand before you." Moses strikes the rock, but water flows out for the very people who were quarrelling, accusing and doubting.

God was not performing a trick to win an argument. God was revealing divine compassion and covenant faithfulness. The water was not a reward for the people's good behaviour. It was grace given to people in their need.

Their testing was answered with provision. Their quarrelling was met with patience. Their doubt was covered by grace. Human faithlessness did not destroy divine faithfulness. That is countercultural. Grace that meets doubt with generosity rather than condemnation runs counter to every instinct we have about how offended parties are supposed to behave.

The Apostle Paul later reflects on Israel's wilderness journey and says: "They drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ." (1 Corinthians 10:4)

Therefore, this story points us to the grace revealed fully in Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ, God came among us. Christ was wounded, and from him flows the gift of life. Jesus speaks of living water, the life of God offered freely to thirsty people.

Friends, perhaps someone listening today is standing at Rephidim. "Is the LORD among us or not?" When there was no water, God was there. When the people could not recognise God, God was there. When they quarrelled and tested God, God was still there, meeting their failure with grace and their thirst with water.

Is the LORD among us or not?

Yes. The Lord is among us, not because we have understood everything; the Lord is among us because God is faithful. Let us drink and remember, "He is with us. Amen."

Hymn StF 544 – As the deer pants for the water <https://youtu.be/vonlv7iB4bM?si=0atXZ06m5P9ytuHu>

As the deer panteth for the water	You're my Friend and You are my Brother	I want You more than gold or silver
So my soul longeth after Thee	Even though You are a King	Only You can satisfy
You alone are my heart's desire	I love You more than any other	You alone are the real joy-giver
And I long to worship Thee	So much more than anything	And the apple of my eye
You alone are my Strength, my Shield	You alone are my Strength, my Shield	You alone are my Strength, my Shield
To You alone may my spirit yield	To You alone may my spirit yield	To You alone may my spirit yield
You alone are my heart's desire	You alone are my heart's desire	You alone are my heart's desire
And I long to worship Thee.	And I long to worship Thee.	And I long to worship Thee.

Prayer of Intercession and Lord's Prayer

Loving God, we pray especially today for the younger generation and for 3Generate, the largest Methodist gathering of children and young people. We pray for all the young people, leaders, volunteers and organisers who will gather together. Keep them safe, help them to grow in faith, and may they experience your love in a new way.

Let the Spirit of God touch our younger generation.

Lord, we pray for those who have questions about your presence in their lives. We also remember the times when doubts and questions arise within us. Help us to recognise that you are still among us.

Let the Spirit of God speak to your people.

Lord, we pray for the sick, the lonely and the bereaved in our churches and communities. We remember those who are waiting for treatment, those who care for loved ones, and those who feel forgotten. Surround them with your healing, comfort and peace.

Let the Spirit of God be present in their lives.

Lord, we pray for our world. We remember people affected by war, violence, poverty, hunger and natural disasters. Protect those who are in danger, provide for those who are in need, and guide the leaders of the nations in the ways of justice and peace.

Let the Spirit of God renew our world.

Lord, we pray for the mission of your Church and the ministry of your people across the world. Give courage to those who proclaim the gospel, wisdom to those who lead, and strength to all who serve. Help your Church to become a visible sign of your presence and love.

Let the Spirit of God guide and inspire every endeavour.

Lord, we pray for ourselves. You know our needs, our questions and the burdens we carry. In a moment of silence, we bring them before you. Silence

We bring all our prayers in the name of Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

Hymn StF 645 – Will your anchor hold

<https://youtu.be/UQQO8v-0VBo?si=RCOdZKuWAA0QRMhp>

Will your anchor hold in the storms of life,
When the clouds unfold their wings of strife?
When the strong tides lift, and the cables strain,
Will your anchor drift or firm remain?

We have an anchor that keeps the soul
Steadfast and sure while the billows roll,
Fastened to the Rock which cannot move,
Grounded firm and deep in the Saviour's love.

It is safely moored, 'twill the storm withstand,
For 'tis well secured by the Saviour's hand;

And the cables passed from His heart to mine,
Can defy the blast, through strength divine.

It will firmly hold in the straits of fear,
When the breakers have told the reef is near;
Though the tempest rave and the wild winds blow,
Not an angry wave shall our bark o'erflow.

It will surely hold in the floods of death,
When the waters cold chill our latest breath;
On the rising tide it can never fail,
While our hopes abide within the veil.

Blessing : May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ sustain us in the storms of life; May the love of God surround and cover us, even in the dry and thirsty places; May the fellowship of the Holy Spirit lead us through life's rocks and deserts, and bring us, at the last, to living water. And the blessing of God almighty — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — be upon us and remain with us, this day and always. Amen.