

## The God Who Provides (Part 5 of 6)

### The Rock We Struck, The Banner We Trust

Exodus 17

Mark Vroegop

---

*"All the congregation of the people of Israel moved on from the wilderness of Sin by stages, according to the commandment of the LORD, and camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink." And Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?" But the people thirsted there for water, and the people grumbled against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" So Moses cried to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." And the LORD said to Moses, "Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel, and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink." And Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. And he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the quarreling of the people of Israel, and because they tested the LORD by saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?" Then Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim. So Moses said to Joshua, "Choose for us men, and go out and fight with Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand." So Joshua did as Moses told him, and fought with Amalek, while Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed, and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed. But Moses' hands grew weary, so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it, while Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side. So his hands were steady until the going down of the sun. And Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the sword. Then the LORD said to Moses, "Write this as a memorial in a book and recite it in the ears of Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven." And Moses built an altar and called the name of it, The LORD Is My Banner, saying, "A hand upon the throne of the LORD! The LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation."'" (Exodus 17:1–16, ESV)*

Exodus is not an easy book to interpret. In many respects New Testament epistles are much easier because the flow of the argument is much more linear, and the message is usually clearly identified. Exodus is difficult and challenging for two reasons. First, it is mostly narrative. The book is a collection of the most important stories connected to Israel's deliverance from Egypt and how they became God's people. While stories are great for listening, it is sometimes hard to sort out which details are the most important and which aspects are central to the message.

Second, Exodus is challenging because the interpreter must connect the content of the story to the big picture story of Bible – the Gospel. This is what makes the book of Exodus so glorious, but it is also what makes it so challenging. There is a danger that as you interpret the book, you could

over-analyze or over-allegorize, or that you could create typologies that just aren't there in the text. In other words, the interpreter could create applications or connections that are forced. But there is also a danger that in not connecting Exodus to the Gospel that you would miss the real point of the book and much of its beauty.

In preparing for this series, I read a few books on how to preach Christ or the Gospel from the Old Testament. They were helpful, but every week, as I begin my preparation for Sunday, there is a sense of intimidation – feeling the weight of the message of this book and feeling the burden to not make the text say something it really doesn't.

Today's text is one of those rare moments when a New Testament author actually helps us by making the connection for us. As the Apostle Paul looked back on Exodus 17, he clearly identified the underlying message. Here is what he said:

*"For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. **For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.**" (1 Corinthians 10:1–4, ESV, emphasis mine)*

So we can approach this text in a sense of anticipation. There is something here that is directly connected to the New Testament.

Today we are going to look at two accounts with one common theme. The provision of water from the rock and the victory over the Amalekites both demonstrate that **God's greatest provision is Himself**. Since chapter thirteen we have seen the ways God provides for His people. Last week we saw that through the provision of manna, but today we see this through the provision of God's personal interaction with His people. But there are surprising things for Israel to learn about God's presence.

### **A Quarrel with God**

The people of Israel, like all sinful human beings, learn important lessons slowly and often the hard way. Despite seeing the Lord's provision at Marah and the daily supply of manna, the people fail to trust God when their needs seem to be unmet again. Chapter seventeen tells us that the people continued their journey in the wilderness, arrived at a place called Rephidim (which means resting place), and discovered that there was no water. It's not that there is bitter water; there is no water at all.

As a result of the lack of water, the people of Israel once again fall into a pattern of grumbling. This is the fourth time that Israel fails to trust in God when facing a "gap" in their life (see 14:11, 12; 15:24; 16:2). Once again they lash out at Moses, blaming him for their troubles:

*"Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink." And Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?" But the people thirsted there for water, and the people grumbled against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" (Exodus 17:2–3, ESV)*

This is a familiar response for Israel, but there are also some new aspects here. First, the text says that the people “quarreled” with Moses. Their grumbling, which means talking against, had escalated to a new level of animosity and opposition. Second, the people moved from complaining to demanding. Their internal rebellion was now starting to bubble to the surface. Third, Moses cautions the people that they are “testing the Lord.” In other words, he makes a direct connection between their grumbling and their quarreling to their relationship with God. Moses connects the dots between the “gap” and their God.

Notice what they accuse Moses and God of doing to them:

- **Neglect (v 2)** - “Give us water to drink.” They didn’t believe that God was going to provide.
- **Negligence (v 3)** - “Why did you bring us out of Egypt?” They questioned the wisdom of leaving Egypt.
- **Murder (v 3)** - “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to kill us with thirst?” They accused Moses and God of setting in motion their ruin and death.
- **Abandonment (v 7)** - “Is the Lord among us or not?” This is a summary of their complaint and the most serious charge. They doubted God’s presence.

All it took was a lack of water, and the people of God, despite everything that they had seen, doubted whether God was really in their midst. This was really a way of doubting whether God really had made Israel His firstborn son (see Ex. 4:22 and 13:2). Israel’s heart was hard, and the circumstances of life were unpeeling their hearts and revealing a problem with God. Psalm 97 gives us a commentary on God’s perspective:

*“For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, when your fathers put me to the test and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.”*  
(Psalm 95:7–9, ESV)

What happens in Exodus 17 will become a very important example of the problem of opposing God. Grumbling is one thing; quarreling with God is another. Both are sinful, but this quarrel with God was an escalation of their rebellion.

### **God on Trial**

What happens next in the text is really unbelievable. God intended to teach His people a lesson, so He addresses their quarreling by putting Himself on trial. The people have made some serious accusations, and God will show them how wrong they are and how gracious He is through a single moment at a rock near Horeb.

Moses appealed to God in verse four because he sensed that the people were angry enough to kill him. Things were getting out of control. God’s solution is found in verse 5:

*“And the LORD said to Moses, “Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel, and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go.””* (Exodus 17:5, ESV)

These are not mere instructions. God was setting the stage for a dramatic illustration that was designed to teach Israel and those who would read about this story. Moses was to gather the elders, take the staff which was a symbol of divine authority, and they were to form a processional line in front of the people. The ethos of this moment was designed to capture that a serious event was happening. And it was serious. Verse 6 tells us what was going to happen:

*“Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink.” And Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel.* (Exodus 17:6, ESV)

Don't miss what God said here. “I will stand before you.” The God of the universe, the Great “I AM” was going to willingly endure the scorn of His own people. They were going to put Him on trial. It was outrageous and dangerous. What's more, He was going to receive punishment from their hands – “you shall strike the rock.” The rod of God was what Moses used to facilitate judgment on Egypt, and now that rod was going to be used as a means of judgment on God.

The divine plan here was for the people to unfairly accuse God of treating them unfairly. Then God would be struck. Then water would be provided for them. In the “judgment,” God would give life to those who were completely undeserving. God's plan was to provide life for His people by putting Himself in the place of judgment. This moment at Meribah (“quarreling”) and Massah (“testing”) became a defining moment in Israel's history.

God merged the sinfulness of His people, unfair judgment, and their provision into one glorious event.

### **Gospel Connections**

Is it any wonder that when the apostle Paul looks back into the Old Testament, that he sees a clear picture of redemption in Jesus? Is it any wonder why he said: *“and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ”* (1 Corinthians 10:4, ESV). The parallels from this moment are all over the Old and New Testament. Let me give you a few examples:

*“Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.”* (Isaiah 53:4–5, ESV)

*“but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”* (John 4:14, ESV)

*“The Spirit and the Bride say, “Come.” And let the one who hears say, “Come.” And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price.”* (Revelation 22:17, ESV)

So the model of God standing in the place of judgment, embracing underserved punishment to provide for His people, and using water as a metaphor is something very familiar if you understand that Gospel.

The Bible tells us that Jesus came to earth as a human being and “dwelt among us” (John 1:14). He was present among us. Jesus lived a perfect life, and yet He was rejected (John 1:12), unfairly judged, and bore unjust punishment. He absorbed the wrath of God so that those who receive Him could satisfy their spiritual thirst.

*“Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.” (John 6:35, ESV)*

This is the beauty of the gospel, that God mercifully offers Himself to take the punishment, and in that punishment, provides life-giving forgiveness. Jesus is the rock we struck.

Just think of the implications of this with me.

1. We get an early indication of the way of redemption. We see that God is willing to take upon Himself unfair treatment in order to provide for His people. Anyone who understands this will find himself or herself filled with love and worship.
2. We see the fundamental upside-down logic of the Christian faith. Love, self-sacrifice, consideration of others, even when unfairly treated, and the divine purpose of suffering are what make real Christianity so potentially radical and transformative.
3. The grace of humility is so evident here. God takes a position which is infinitely below what He really deserves, and yet He embraces it in order to lovingly provide for His people. Is it any wonder that Paul said, “Have this mind in you which is yours in Christ Jesus . . . (Phil 2:5).

Jesus is the rock that was struck. Jesus is the example we should follow. But God is also the banner we trust.

### **The First Battle**

For the last two chapters we have watched as Israel has battled internally with issues of fear and trust. God has used the Red Sea, the provision of sweet water, the sending of daily bread, and the supply of water out of the rock. God has attempted to show them that He will provide for them. The God who delivers is the God who provides.

However, Israel was about to learn that she is in hostile territory. Satan hates what God loves, and if slavery under an oppressive, genocidal regime did not destroy the people of God, then perhaps an attack from another angle will. The Israelites face their first military battle.

Keep in mind that prior to this time, God was the one who did all the fighting for them. It was God who brought the Plagues. It was God who killed the first-born, and it was God who parted the Red Sea. To this point, the nation’s role has been to “ . . . fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord.” (Ex. 14:13) Their role has been to watch, wait, and trust.

Sometimes that is all the Lord calls us to. There are times when there is nothing that we can do but wait. One of my favorite passages in this regard is Lamentations 3:25-27.

*"The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD. It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth."*  
(Lamentations 3:25–27, ESV)

It is good, right, and helpful to wait on the Lord. At the same time, not everything about the Christian life involves waiting. There is a real battle that we face. There are practical things that we must do. There is a war to be waged. So how do the people of God wage that war? Are fighting and waiting mutually exclusive terms?

We learn in 17:8 that the people of Amalek came out to attack Israel. This group of people was distant relatives of Israel, since they descended from Esau, and there was continual conflict between Israel and the Amalekites. From what we can gather from history, the Amalekites were a nomadic people who domesticated the camel and lived partly by attacking other nations and plundering their wealth.<sup>1</sup> This particular attack is the first of many military conflicts between Israel and Amalek.

What's more, it is likely that Israel was not adequately prepared for this kind of conflict. Even if some of the Israelites had military training, the numbers of battle-ready men were not large. Amalek was probably seizing an opportunity of weakness and attacked Israel when they were vulnerable.

But, in the midst of this, God has an important lesson for His people.

### **Dependent Victory**

This is the first time that we hear the name "Joshua" in the book of Exodus. The name Joshua means "The Lord is Salvation," and he will become a very important figure in Israel's history as the man who God appointed to lead the nation after Moses' death.

Moses called Joshua to find enough men for battle, and he was going to take the staff of God and go to the top of hill. Moses was going to set himself in a position to seek God's help. Here is how verses 10-11 state it:

*"So Joshua did as Moses told him, and fought with Amalek, while Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed, and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed."* (Exodus 17:10–11, ESV)

While prayer is not specifically mentioned, it seems rather obvious that what happened was meant to make a connection between what happened on the ground and what happened on the hill. The uplifted hands of Moses equaled victory on the ground. And when his hands were lowered, the battle took a turn for the worse.

Moses was unable to sustain this position by himself. In a beautiful picture of solidarity and community, Aaron and Hur hold up his hands for him. They helped Moses by "holding his hands steady until the going down of the sun" (Ex. 17:10-11). Aaron and Hur provided the additional help that Moses needed in his intercessory role.

---

<sup>1</sup> Stuart, D. K. (2006). *Vol. 2: Exodus*. The New American Commentary. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

The effect of this hill-top prayer was an important victory, and one that Israel need to mark in their memory. This lesson was important enough to memorialize.

*“And Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the sword. Then the LORD said to Moses, “Write this as a memorial in a book and recite it in the ears of Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.” And Moses built an altar and called the name of it, The LORD Is My Banner, saying, “A hand upon the throne of the LORD! The LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation.””* (Exodus 17:13–16, ESV)

Part of what needed to be remembered was God’s promise to judge the Amalekites. God was promising that those who raise their hand against God’s people are in effect entering into a conflict with God. That is what “a hand upon the throne of the Lord” likely means. If a person raised his hand against the plan of God, then God was going to deal with him definitively. In other words, God’s plans will not be thwarted.

The other thing that takes place in the text is the construction of an altar to mark the important victory. This was a typical act of commemoration for events in life that were defining (see Gen. 33:20, 27). The altar was meant to communicate a particular message, and therefore Moses gave it a name – “The Lord is my banner.” The Hebrew word and the use of it in Ancient Near East had the idea of a “signal pole.”<sup>2</sup> The word was used for a sign or signal that was used to rally people or troops to a particular point. It was a pole that was raised high about the ground in order to send a signal. The word is used in Isaiah 11:10 to refer to the Messiah:

*“In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples—of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious.”* (Isaiah 11:10, ESV)

In the immediate context, Moses was simply making the point that while Israel was fighting the battle on the ground, it was the Lord who was their rallying cry. They were fighting the battle, but the battle really belonged to the Lord. What’s more, their victory was dependent upon God’s help. There was a direction connection between God’s assistance and their success.

The conflict with the Amalekites was a part of the instruction of Israel regarding God’s ability to be their provider. He had proven His ability to provide a path through the Red Sea, sweet water, manna from heaven, and water from the rock. But now the people were to learn that even their battles are dependent upon the Lord. There are moments when they are called to trust Him and wait, but there are other moments when they are called to trust Him while fighting. They need God’s help in everything!

### **The Lord is Still Our Banner**

I love the scene in my mind of Moses lifting up his hands and being supported by Aaron and Hur. This teachable moment has a number of parallels in the New Testament that we need to consider this morning:

---

<sup>2</sup> Stuart (2006).

1. The followers of Jesus are in real battle in the spiritual realm. Paul tells us that we wrestle with more than with just flesh and blood. There are spiritual forces at work behind the scenes (Eph. 6:12). The enemy is still opposing the people of God. There still is a real battle.
2. Dependency through prayer is still the main way we fight. Ephesians 6:10 and 18 say *“Be strong in the Lord and the power of his might . . . praying all times in the Spirit.”* Prayer is a conduit for God’s power and a reminder that we cannot fight this battle on our own.
3. The battle is not to be fought alone. God has supplied the Spirit, who intercedes for us with *“groanings too deep for words”* (Rom 8:26). We have Jesus, who is our High Priest and through whom we can boldly appeal for mercy and grace (Heb. 4:16). And we have each other. There is something powerful about agreeing together in prayer:

*“Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”*  
(Matthew 18:19–20, ESV)

So there is beautiful sense in the Bible that no matter what battle we are facing, there are divinely given means of grace and help. The struggles in which we are engaged may be difficult and scary, but we are not left on our own.

Jesus is the rock we struck. Jesus is the banner we trust. He provides mercy by absorbing judgment. And He pours out power when we face struggles in life. And the beauty of this passage is that whether the issue is battles within or battles without, God’s greatest provision is Himself.

I love a new song by Matt Redman called *“Never Once”* that we’ve sung a few times. The lyrics capture the beauty of this truth:

Keeling on this battleground  
Seeing just how much you’ve done  
Knowing every victory  
Was your power in us

Scars and struggles on the way  
But with joy our hearts can say

Never once did we ever walk alone  
Never once did you leave us on our own  
You are faithful, God, You are faithful

© College Park Church

**Permissions:** You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce this material in any format provided that you do not alter the content in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: by Mark Vroegop. © College Park Church - Indianapolis, Indiana. [www.yourchurch.com](http://www.yourchurch.com)