



Exodus - Chapter Seventeen

I. Exodus 1:1-18:27 - The Exodus of Israel from Egypt (continues)

I.e Exodus 15:22-18:27 - The Journey (continues)

Summary of Chapter Seventeen

The Israelites continue their journey through the wilderness of Sin in stages and camp at Rephidim, where they have no water. Having just doubted the Lord's provision of food, they now doubt that he will give them life-sustaining and, once again, they quarrel with Moses. Moses again seeks the guidance of God, who tells him to strike his staff against the rock at Horeb. When he does so, water gushes forth from the rock for the people and livestock to drink.

It is at Rephidim that Israel fights its first battle with the people of the land. The Amaleks attack Israel, so Moses instructs Joshua to lead an army out against them, while Moses oversees the battle from a nearby hilltop. All the while Moses holds his staff aloft the Israelites succeed in battle. When he lowers it to the ground through tiredness, the tide of battle turns against Israel. With the help of Aaron and Hur, Moses manages to hold the staff aloft for the remainder of the battle until the Amaleks are finally defeated. Moses built an altar there to commemorate the Lord's victory and his promise to blot out Amalek from the land.

I.e.iii Exodus 17:1-7 - Water from the Rock

Israel grumbles against Moses a third time out of concern for physical provision; refer to 15:24-25 and 16:2-3 for the previous two occasions. The events of this quarrel are similar to those that will take place at the same location and through which Moses will not be allowed to enter Canaan; refer to Numbers 20:2-13.

¹ From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ² The people quarrelled with Moses, and said, 'Give us water to drink.' Moses said to them, 'Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?' ³ But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, 'Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?' ⁴ So Moses cried out to the Lord, 'What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.'

Exodus 17:1-4

The Israelites journeyed by stages. In Numbers 33:12-14 it is said, that when the Israelites came from Sin they encamped in Dophkah, and next in Alush, after which they came to Rephidim. Here, therefore, two staging places are omitted, probably because nothing of real interest took place at either.

As the Lord commanded, but there was no water for the people to drink. Israel did exactly what God commanded, following the pillar of cloud and fire; yet there was no water to drink. They were in the will of God but in a difficult time. It is possible to be completely in the will of God yet also in a season of great problems.

The people again quarrelled with Moses, who describes their actions as their daring to test the Lord. After experiencing the plagues, the crossing of the Red Sea, and the Lord's provision of both water (15:25-27) and food (16:13-14), the people of Israel show a hardness of heart like Pharaoh and the Egyptians, which is precisely how Psalm 95:7-9 describes these events: <<*For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. O that today you would listen to his voice! Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, when your ancestors tested me, and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work*>>.

So Moses cried out to the Lord. The lack of water was not Moses' fault. Yet as the leader of Israel, he had to lead them to the answer - and crying out to the Lord was the right way to lead them to the solution.

Moses knew the people were unfair to him and cries out 'What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me'. However, he still had to lead while under the pressure of unfair attack, and he did the right thing in turning to God in prayer and supplication. Stoning was one of the most common ways a community would put someone to death: <<*But the whole congregation threatened to stone them. Then the glory of the Lord appeared at the tent of meeting to all the Israelites*>> (Numbers 14:10), <<*David was in great danger; for the people*>>.

spoke of stoning him, because all the people were bitter in spirit for their sons and daughters. But David strengthened himself in the Lord his God>> (1 Samuel 30:6), and: <<So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple>> (John 8:59).

⁵ The Lord said to Moses, ‘Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. ⁶ I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.’ Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel.

Exodus 17:5-6

Take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile. God directed Moses to go on ahead of the people, to bring other leaders with him, i.e. take with you some of the elders of Israel with you, and to use what God had used before. This gave confidence to Moses, because he saw God use that same staff to do great miracles before. Moses could not pick up that staff without remembering the power of God. The confidence he received by picking up the staff was confidence in God, not in himself.

At Horeb. This is the place where Moses encountered God in the Burning Bush (3:1). Horeb is typically understood as either another name for Mount Sinai or as a term that refers to the region in which the mountain was located for it means desert or desolation.

I will be standing there in front of you on the rock is a further example of the Lord’s promise to Moses: *<<I will be with you>> (3:12a)*. The Lord’s presence presumably was manifested in the pillar of cloud, providing protection for Moses from the quarrelling people of Israel, but also as a demonstration of God’s power, producing fear and awe among the people. The trustworthiness of God’s promise to provide for his people is dramatically demonstrated, as Moses obeys God’s command to strike the rock and the Lord provides water for his people. This was an account that would be retold throughout the generations: *<<For their hunger you gave them bread from heaven, and for their thirst you brought water for them out of the rock, and you told them to go in to possess the land that you swore to give them>> (Nehemiah 9:15), <<He split rocks open in the wilderness, and gave them drink abundantly as from the deep. He made streams come out of the rock, and caused waters to flow down like rivers>> (Psalm 78:15-16), and: <<They did not thirst when he led them through the deserts; he made water flow for them from the rock; he split open the rock and the water gushed out>> (Isaiah 48:21).*

In light of God's promise to stand there on the rock, some interpreters see a close identification between the presence of God and the rock itself. The command strike the rock, is thus understood to be God's command to Moses to strike God himself, with the result that God himself is the source of the life-giving water that flowed from the rock. This incident probably provides the background in the NT when Paul says <<*the rock was Christ*>> (1 Corinthians 10:4b).

⁷ He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarrelled and tested the Lord, saying, 'Is the Lord among us or not?'

Exodus 17:7

The place where these events happened will bear names for Israel that reflect these events for Massah means testing and Meribah means quarrelling, and thus act as a reminder for the people. This is confirmed by Hebrews 3:7-4:13.

The Israelites quarrelled and tested the Lord. God dramatically said: <<*I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb*>> (v.6), saying that he was and would be present with Israel. Yet they still wondered 'Is the Lord among us or not?'

Later, when Israel remembered God's provision in the wilderness at the Festival of Tabernacles, they had a specific ceremony where they recalled this miracle of water from a rock. In that exact context, Jesus said: <<*On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, "Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water"'*>> (John 7:37-38). The living water Jesus spoke of was the Holy Spirit: <<*Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified*>> (John 7:39); it is no less of a miracle for God to bring the love and power of the Holy Spirit out of a believer's heart than it is to bring water out of a rock - their heart can be just as hard.

I.e.iv Exodus 17:8-16 - Amalek Attacks Israel and Is Defeated

While Israel is camped at Rephidim the people face their first battle when they are attacked by the people of Amalek, who inhabited the northern Sinai peninsula: <<*then they turned back and came to En-mishpat (that is, Kadesh), and subdued all the country of the Amalekites, and also the Amorites who lived in Hazazon-tamar*>> (Genesis 14:7), and: <<*The Amalekites live in the land of the Negeb; the Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites live in the hill country; and the Canaanites live by the sea, and along the Jordan*>> (Numbers 13:29).

⁸ Then Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim. ⁹ Moses said to Joshua, 'Choose some men for us and go out; fight with Amalek.'

Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand.’¹⁰ So Joshua did as Moses told him, and fought with Amalek, while Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill.¹¹ Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed; and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed.¹² But Moses’ hands grew weary; so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it. 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 sun set.¹³ And Joshua defeated Amalek and his people with the sword.

Exodus 17:8-13

Then Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim. This was an unprovoked attack by the Amalekites against Israel. In response, Moses called Joshua to lead the armies of Israel into battle, to defend the nation against the attack from Amalek. It was stragglers from the main group of Israelites who were initially attacked: *<<Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey out of Egypt, how he attacked you on the way, when you were faint and weary, and struck down all who lagged behind you; he did not fear God>>* (Deuteronomy 25:17-18), and Moses responded by sending out a force of fighting men to take them on as a result.

Amalek was the grandson of Esau (Genesis 36:12) and, although a kinsman of Israel, proved their most inveterate foe, as subsequent history shows. There is every possibility that they had known about the promise of the Land of Canaan that had been given to Esau’s twin brother Jacob; therefore, they should not have felt any threat to their interests in the Negeb, (also spelt Negev), had this promise been remembered and taken seriously. Like many other nomads, they ranged over a wide area, roughly described as ‘the Negeb’ or ‘south land’.

This is the first mention of Joshua, who acts as an assistant to Moses; refer also to 24:13 and 33:11. He will be one of only two adults born in Egypt who are faithful in the wilderness and live to enter the Promised Land. He will succeed Moses, leading Israel into Canaan; refer to Deuteronomy 34:9 and Joshua 1:1-9.

Go out; fight with Amalek. This was a significant first experience of warfare for ancient Israel. They had lived for hundreds of years as slaves, and God fought the Egyptians for them. Now they had to learn rely on God as they fought a military battle. In their journey out of Egypt God led them in such a way as to avoid the possibility of war (13:17). Now they were involved in bloody battle.

So Joshua did as Moses told him. Joshua continued to be faithful to the authority of Moses until he passed from the scene and Joshua was anointed to succeed him as the leader of the people. By serving Moses, Joshua was also serving God. It should also be remembered that Jesus is the Greek equivalent of Joshua.

Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. They did this so they could see, so they could be seen, and so that they could pray. Aaron was the brother of Moses, and some think Hur was his brother-in-law. This is confirmed by Josephus who states that Hur was married to Miriam in Jewish Antiquities.

The focus on Moses' hand(s) manifests two things that the people of Israel need to take to heart:

1. Moses is the one whom the Lord has chosen to lead Israel; notice that Moses' hands relate to who prevailed.
2. The Lord is responsible for working their deliverance through Moses, signified by the staff of God in Moses' hand and the fact that his hands grew weary, showing his human weakness. Moses was, of course, in his early eighties by this time.

The job of supporting the battle in prayer was difficult and Moses could not easily continue. One might think that the fighting was the hard work and praying was the easy part, but true prayer can also be a real struggle. Prayer is sometimes sweet and easy; other times it is hard work. This is why Paul described the ministry of Epaphras as: <<Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you. He is always wrestling in his prayers on your behalf, so that you may stand mature and fully assured in everything that God wills>> (Colossians 4:12), and why Paul also wrote: <<Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with thanksgiving>> (Colossians 4:2).

Aaron and Hur held up his hands. Aaron and Hur came alongside Moses and literally held his hands up in prayer. They helped him and partnered with him in intercession. Their help was successful: his hands were steady until the sun set. Although this was Moses' work to do, it was more than he could do by himself. Moses alone could not win the battle of prayer. He needed others to come by his side and strengthen him in prayer. The church can play a key role in supporting their leadership in prayer.

Joshua defeated Amalek and his people with the sword. Because of this work of prayer Israel was victorious over Amalek. There is no other option than to say if Moses, Aaron, and Hur did not do the work in prayer, Israel would have been defeated, and history would have been changed. This amazing passage reveals the great importance of prayer. Life and death - the course of history itself - depended upon prayer. It can be concluded that many times the people of God are defeated today because they will not pray, or prayer does not support their work.

¹⁴ Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Write this as a reminder in a book and recite it in the hearing of Joshua: I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven.'¹⁵ And Moses built an altar and called it, The Lord is my banner. ¹⁶ He said, 'A hand upon the

banner of the Lord! The Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation.'

Exodus 17:14-16

Write this as a reminder in a book. There are five places in the Pentateuch where Moses wrote something down at the command of God (Exodus 17:14, 24:4-7 and 34:27, Numbers 33:1-2, and Deuteronomy 31:9-24). Not very long ago some academics were sceptical and said that writing was not invented by Moses' day. Further research proved that man had been writing for at least 1,500 years before the time of Moses, who would have been taught to write by the royal scholars as he was growing up in the palace in Egypt.

I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven. No explicit reason is given for the severity of the Lord's judgement on Amalek. A later reference to the event in Deuteronomy 25:17-19 says that Amalek <<**did not fear God**>> having attacked the people of Israel who were trailing behind because they tired from the journey. The Amalekites still posed a threat to Israel in the days of Saul and David: <<**Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey**>> (1 Samuel 15:3).

Amalek had a special guilt and shame in their attack against Israel:

- Amelek had the shame of being the first nation to make war with Israel.
- Amelek had the shame of going out of their way to attack Israel.
- Amelek had the shame of actually fighting against God.

And Moses built an altar and called it, The Lord is my banner. Although Moses knew his prayer was important, he was not foolish enough to think that he won the battle in his own strength and leadership. As an act of worship he built an altar and praised the name of *Jehovah-nissi*.

Nissi describes a flag or a banner. The idea is that God is victorious in battle and the flag of his victory is lifted high. The same word is used in the following significant passages:

- <<**And the Lord said to Moses, 'Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live'**>> (Numbers 21:8).
- <<**You have set up a banner for those who fear you, to rally to it out of bowshot**>> (Psalm 60:4).
- <<**In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his resting place will be glorious**>> (Isaiah 11:10 NIV).

This chapter reveals examples of God's power and man's effort working together. Moses struck the rock; but only God could bring the water. Joshua fought, Moses prayed, but only God gave the victory over Amalek. In it all, God received the glory. It was not 'Israel is my banner' or 'Moses is my banner' or 'Joshua is my banner'; rather it was *Jehovah-nissi*: 'God is my banner'. People are sometimes even more aware of the power and the help of God when they work together with him than they are when God does the work all by himself. *Jehovah-nissi* came after the battle with Amalek, not after the dead Egyptians at the Red Sea.

The Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation. This was not the last battle with or mention of the Amalekites. God continued his war against them, but gave them much time to repent of this great sin of attacking their cousin, Israel:

- Balaam prophesied of their ruin (Numbers 24:20).
- Hundreds of years later, Saul fought against them (1 Samuel 14:48).
- God then commanded Saul to continue the fight against Amalek, to bring complete judgement upon them for their ancient sin against Israel (1 Samuel 15:1-7).
- In partial obedience to God, Saul fought against the Amalekites and routed them, but kept their king alive (and presumably others) while also enriching himself in the battle (1 Samuel 15:7-9).
- The failure to obey God in regard to Amalek was the primary act of disobedience that cost Saul the throne (1 Samuel 15:2-9 and 28:18).
- The Amalekites existed after this, so we know Saul did not complete the work God gave to him (1 Samuel 27:8 and 30:17, and 2 Samuel 8:12).
- There are some indications that this work was completed in the late days of the divide monarchy under Hezekiah (1 Chronicles 4:41-43); however, it is possible that some descendants of the Amalekites remained, such as Haman in Esther 3:1.

Because of God's strong command to battle against Amalek until they were completely conquered, many see the Amalekites as a picture of sinful flesh, the unspiritual aspect of man that makes war against the spirit. In this sense, 'Amalek' constantly battles against the spirit and must be struggled against until completely conquered, as Paul knew only too well: <<*For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want*>> (Galatians 5:17).