

**FROM ONE TRIAL TO ANOTHER**

Moses - Part 11

Exodus 17

**Intro:** As we trace the journey of the children of Israel out of Egypt, they seemed to go from one trial to another. But as we read about the trials, we realize that many of the trials were of their own making. It was not that the Lord did not provide for His people, but it was that He did not provide in the way and at the time that they thought that He should. Providing food and water for such a tremendously large group was far beyond the capacity of Moses and Aaron, or even of all of the children of Israel themselves. The Lord obviously was teaching His people to trust Him, and Him alone, as they were confronted with new experiences and new circumstances along the way. They thought that they were all going to be killed or taken back to Egypt by the Egyptian army when they seemed to be trapped at the Red Sea. They did not know that the Lord was going to open a path through the midst of the Sea, and lead them through on dry ground. Nor did they know that the Lord was going to use that same passage as the very place He would destroy the whole Egyptian army.

Remember that all of the time the Lord was leading them in the cloudy pillar by day, and the pillar of fire by night. So as they came to each place they had to know that they were there by the leading of the Lord. If they had entertained that thought, it would have saved them a lot of trouble – and it would have saved Moses a lot of trouble too.

After that miraculous deliverance through the Red Sea, and after they saw the Egyptian army destroyed, they went three days in the wilderness of Shur. But they did not find any water there. They evidently were carrying their own water up to that time, but the supply must have been running short. Then they came to Marah where the water was bitter, which probably means that it was not fit to drink. But Moses cried out to the Lord, and the Lord led Moses to a tree, which, when he cut it down, and cast it into the water, the water was purified, and made safe to drink. From Marah they went on to Elim, and there they had the luxury of finding twelve wells of water and a regular oasis of seventy palm trees. However, it is thought by some expositors that their stop there was one of the reasons they were attacked by the Amalekites in our text for today because the Amalekites did not want the Israelites invading their territory.

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But leaving Elim, they entered the wilderness of Sin, and it was there that they learned that God would feed them day by day with manna in the mornings, and quails at night. We had that as we considered Exodus 16.

Leaving the wilderness of Sin, they came to Rephidim, which according to some expositors means “rests” or “stops,” meaning *resting places*. Here they were coming to a range of mountains of which Mt. Sinai was the highest peak, but they were traveling through narrow passes which rose up from the desert floor. What the Israelites soon discovered was that there was no sign of water anywhere!

I think that we can safely assume that they discovered that there was no water in that area after diligently searching the area, hoping to find water. The mention of their children and their cattle in Exodus 17:3 means that although all the people were beginning to suffer from thirst, the people were especially concerned about their children and their cattle. There must have been a lot of crying among the children, and perhaps the animals were too weak from a lack of water so that they were having trouble walking around. I am suggesting this although how much the people were suffering is not told us in the Bible, but it is evident that the need was something of a crisis. So the people did what they had done before, they went to Moses and made their complaint to him. And it must have been very, very serious because we learn in verse 4 that Moses thought that the people were ready to kill him they were so angry with him. Moses, humanly speaking, was helpless. But he did the one thing that he knew that he could do: *he prayed!* He went to the Lord, and he asked the Lord what he should do. It was a new experience for Moses as well as for the people. I can imagine how Moses felt. He had been speechless before in a time of crisis, but this seems to have been the most hopeless situation that either he or the people had ever faced.

Now let us stop and think about this situation for a moment. What was wrong here? The hopeless situation that they faced made them forget all that they had been through before, and how God had miraculously provided for them time and time again. Plus, they had an advantage that we don't always have. It was this: They knew that they were where they were by the will of God. There was no question about that! The pillar was right there by day and night. And I will tell you another thing that they had forgotten. They had forgotten that God was there with them. The cloud by day which turned into fire by night was not only guide them, but to remind them that God was in the cloud. He was with His people.

He had not forsaken them, and He would not forsake them.

We might feel justified in being very critical of the Israelites, except for one thing. We have had our times when it seems we were suffering from a loss of memory. We have failed to take God's faithfulness to us *in the past*, and apply it to God in the present. Has God ever failed us? Has He ever abandoned us in our times of need? He may not have done what we expected Him to do, and wanted Him to do, but He has never failed us.

Think, too, of the testimony of Scripture. Can we point to a single time when the Lord has left His people when they needed Him? We may face some very trying circumstances, and we hardly ever really know what the Lord is doing with us, but He never leaves us; He always takes care of us! What He was seeking to teach the Israelites when He put them in circumstances that seemed to have no solution to them, *was to trust Him!* And so when Moses went to Him in prayer, that is exactly what the Lord wanted Moses and all of the people to do.

F. B. Meyer, who was a Pastor in London during the days of Spurgeon, has expressed the situation here in Exodus 17 so well, that I want to read to you what he had to say. Listen to his words:

At first the people chode, or strove, with Moses, willfully ignoring the fact that their route was determined by the cloud; then their murmurings became so threatening that Moses really feared for his life; and finally they began to question whether the Lord was among them or not. "They tempted the Lord," i.e., they doubted Him, questioned His love and care, impeached His righteousness, and finally suggested that He had deserted them, and all because He did not act in the way they expected. Ignoring the lessons of the plagues, the marvels of the Exodus, the triumphal passage of the Red Sea, they actually questioned whether God was with them at all. In the Gospels the same spirit was always challenging Christ for signs. Not content with His spotless holiness, His words and deeds, His fulfillment of ancient prophecy they were always asking for the outward and sensible evidence of God's presence and power (*A Devotional Commentary on Exodus, Volume I*, p. 194).

Listen to what King David had to say about God in Psalm 37:25:

25 I have been young , and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread.

Their behavior was really amazing, wasn't it? How could they have doubted the faithfulness of God, or the wisdom of God, or the power of God, or the grace of God?

What did the Lord do? They should have been very, very thankful that the Lord did not give them what they deserved. And haven't there been times in our lives when we need to be thankful that the Lord did not give us what we deserved?

(Re-read verses 5 and 6.)

Water came where there had never been water before, and never has been since (as far as we know). God is a God of the impossible. Cf. Eph. 3:20 and 21:

20 Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us,  
21 Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.

Although we do not see miracles like the children of Israel saw in their journey from Egypt to Canaan, nor as the Lord performed while He was here on earth, yet let us never forget that God is immutable, unchanging, and unchangeable. He is the God "Who is, and Who was, and Who is to come" (Rev. 1:4, 8; 4:8).

The symbolism here is very clear according to Scripture. We learn from 1 Cor. 10:4 that the Rock was a type of Christ:

4 And did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ.

This does not mean that the rock was not a real rock, nor that the water was not real water, but that both had significance spiritually far beyond the rock which Moses and the elders stood before, and the water which the people, their children, and their animals all did eat. It pointed ahead to the work of Christ on the Cross. We learn from Isaiah 53 which speaks prophetically of Christ,

4 Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.

5 But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.

6 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all (Isa. 53:4-6).

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There never has been, and never will be, a greater manifestation of the grace of God, than there was in the death of God's Son. It forever stands as the greatest display of the love of God. Cf. John 3:16-17; Rom. 5:8. In the same way it displayed the grace of God toward a rebellious and sinning nation when God displayed His wisdom, grace, and power, in providing water where there never had been water – and out of a rock!

That place was name “Massah” (proving) and “Meribah” (strife) because it was there that the Lord was testing His people, and where the people demonstrated the rebellion in their hearts toward the ways of God, and even toward the faithfulness of God and the ways of God.

**BUT THAT WAS HARDLY COMPLETED BEFORE ANOTHER TRIAL APPEARED. THIS TIME IT WAS NOT FROM WITHIN THE NATION OF ISRAEL, BUT FROM THE OUTSIDE. AND IT IS INTRODUCED BY THE OMINOUS WORD, “Then came Amalek.”**

The people of God were in enemy territory. The Amalekites were the descendants of Amalek, a grandson of Esau. See Gen. 36:12. One great difference to be seen in this event was the calmness of Moses as compared with his distress and alarm in connection with the rebellion of Israel in the even which we have just examined. Here Moses did not say to the Lord, as he had said in connection with the rebellion of the people at Horeb. He knew what to do. He knew that only God could spare the people from total defeat at the hands of the Amalekites. (Read the account in verses 8 through 11.)

Previously when the Egyptians were after the Israelites, the people of God were not required to fight. They stood still and watched God defend them. But now they were to fight under the leadership of Joshua. While Joshua was leading the people in conflict against the mighty Amalekite forces, Moses, Aaron, and Hur “went up to the top of the hill” (evidently upon one of the rocky, mountain peaks in the area where they had full view of the conflict that was going on below.

Verse 11 tells us what determined the way the battle went below. When Moses held up his hands, “Israel prevailed,” but due to the heaviness of his hands, and the impossibility that Moses could hold his hands up indefinitely, when his hands dropped, the Amalekites prevailed.

We turn to a very significant word which the Apostle Paul gave to

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Timothy which helps us to understand this event. It is found in 1 Timothy 2:8 where Paul told Timothy:

8 I will therefore that men pray every where, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting .

The prevailing interpretation of this act of Moses has been that this lifting up of Moses' hands expressed his dependence upon the Lord in prayer. But prayer is one of the hardest things that any of us does. It was while our Lord was in prayer with His Father that He sweat drops of blood. Cf. Luke 22:24. *But notice what we are told in Exodus 17:11-12.* The holding up of Moses' hands was the key to the victory. So when his strength was exhausted, Aaron and Hur had Moses sit down on a rock while they stood on each side of him, holding up his hands until the sun went down and the Israelites had routed the Amalekites. It was clear that God had given His people the victory in answer to prayer.

This point on prayer unites these two events in Exodus 17. God gave the people water when the Lord answered Moses' prayer, "What shall I do . . . ?" He was already doing it when he asked. The Lord delivered Moses and provided water for the people in answer to prayer. Likewise when it came to warfare, the first time the Israelites has been engaged in a war, the victory was given in answer to prayer.

But we have an added lesson about prayer in this second event. We see a picture of the importance of fellowship in prayer. It does not mean that God is more likely to answer prayer when three are praying instead of just one, but it does mean that it was not just Moses who was looking to the Lord for victory, but that Aaron and Hur were supporting him in his calling upon the Lord when they stepped in to hold up the hands of Moses until God gave them a complete victory.

Later Moses wrote about this conflict, and told the Israelites not to forget this amazing event. His words are found in Deuteronomy 25:17-19:

17 Remember what Amalek did unto thee by the way, when ye were come forth out of Egypt;

18 How he met thee by the way, and smote the hindmost of thee, even all that were feeble behind thee, when thou wast faint and weary; and he feared not God.

19 Therefore it shall be, when the LORD thy God hath given thee rest from all thine enemies round about, in the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee for an inheritance to possess it, that thou shalt blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; thou shalt not forget it.

Many consider Amalek to be a type of the flesh, our old nature, which

continues to be one of our three major enemies: the first being the Devil; the second, the world; and the third, the flesh. The Devil often attacks us when we are physically weary and tired. But the day is coming, and we all must look forward to that time when neither the Devil, nor the world, nor our own flesh, will ever again be able to trouble us, drawing us into sin.

The children of Israel were not to forget this very great victory. Nor were they to forget how the victory came, not primarily with the battle below, but because three men stood on a mountain cliff above united in their expression of trust in the living God.

Notice the twofold promise that the Lord gave His people:

- 1) That He, the Lord, would ultimately destroy even the remembrance of Amalek “from under heaven” (v. 14).
- 2) That until that time came, He, the Lord, would engage in warfare with Amalek, defending His own people. See verse 16.

So Moses built an altar in commemoration of this event, and he named it, “Jehovah-nissi,” which means, *the Lord is my banner*. Jamieson, in the JFB commentary series, made this important comment:

Since no mention is made of sacrifices, it has been supposed that this altar was intended as a pious trophy, a grateful memorial after the battle was won, not in honour of Moses, who had raised his hands, nor to Aaron and Hur, who had upheld them, nor to Joshua, the commander, nor to the soldiers who had fought the battle, but to the Lord, whose right hand and holy arm had gotten them the victory.

And we are reminded by F. B. Meyer, that a banner in Israel was not a flag on a pole, but a pole with an ornament on top of it. And so this altar was probably in honor of God Whose rod Moses used to display the mighty power of God on this and many other occasions.

**Concl:** So what lessons are we to learn from this important passage?

There are many, but let me mention just three as I close:

- 1) The absolute trustworthiness of God.
- 2) The importance of prayer.
- 3) That God does what He does, first, for His own glory, and, second, not just to meet our material and physical needs, but to meet the spiritual needs of our hearts. Cf. Phil. 1:6. Let us remember, too, that as we observe the Lord’s Supper this morning, this represents our banner, our Lord Jesus Christ, our Jehovah-nissi. All the glory for our salvation belongs to our triune God.