

The Book of Exodus

Lesson 12: Water from the Rock; Victory over Amalek -- Exodus 17:1-18:27

Imagine the dust in your throat. Imagine a whole nation, hundreds of thousands of people with their flocks and their children, camped in a place called Rephidim where there is no water. Not a little water, none. The skins are empty, the lips are cracked, the little ones are crying, and the sun does not care. This is where Exodus 17 opens, and before we shake our heads at Israel we should feel the dryness ourselves, because thirst is honest. Thirst strips away our pretending and asks one raw question: is the Lord among us or not? That is exactly the question Israel asks, and it is a question that finds every one of us sooner or later, in some wilderness of our own.

Watch what God does. He does not scold the thirst; He answers it, but in the strangest way. Take your staff, He tells Moses, the very staff that struck the Nile and turned it to blood, and strike the rock. Strike a rock and water comes out? Yes. Moses strikes, and a stream gushes from the stone in the desert, enough for a nation to drink. It is a picture so vivid that centuries later, the apostle Paul will look back at this very rock and say something breathtaking: they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ. The water in the wilderness was pointing all along to the One who would stand up in the temple and cry, if anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink.

Then the lesson shifts, and the enemy changes from thirst to a sword. Amalek attacks, the first nation to make war on the freed people of God. And here we meet one of the tenderest pictures in all of Scripture. Moses climbs a hill with the staff of God in his hand, and as long as he holds his hands up, Israel prevails, but when his arms grow heavy and sink, Amalek prevails. Moses is only a man; his arms tire like ours do. So Aaron and Hur put a stone under him to sit on, and then they stand on either side and hold up his hands, one on this side and one on that, until the sun goes down. Israel wins, not by stronger swords, but by upheld hands. There is a whole theology of dependence and of the body of Christ holding one another up in that one image.

And then a visitor arrives. Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, comes out to the wilderness, rejoices in all that God has done, and watches Moses work. From morning till evening, alone, Moses sits as the one judge for a whole nation, the people lined up around him from dawn to dusk. Jethro says plainly, what you are doing is not good; you will wear yourself out. Then he gives the kind of counsel every overworked, well-meaning servant of God needs to hear: you cannot do this alone, so share the load. Choose able men who fear God, who are trustworthy and hate dishonest gain, and let them help you carry it. In one chapter we learn that God's work was never meant to rest on one set of shoulders, a truth that runs straight to the way the Lord's church is led and served today.

Group Discussion: At Massah and Meribah, Israel had just seen the sea split and the manna fall, yet a dry place pushed them to quarrel with Moses and to ask whether the Lord was even among them. What does this account reveal about how quickly hardship can turn into grumbling and the testing of God, and where do you see that same pattern in the church and in your own heart when life runs dry?

Personal Reflection: When Moses' hands grew heavy, he did not pretend to be strong; he let Aaron and Hur hold them up. Where in your life right now are your arms tired, and who are the people God has given to stand on either side and hold you up, if only you would let them?

Read Exodus 17:1–18:27

Study Questions

1. Read 17:1–4. With no water at Rephidim, the people quarrel with Moses and put the Lord to the test, asking whether the Lord is among them or not. What does this scene reveal about the difference between honestly bringing our need to God and faithlessly testing Him, and why does Scripture treat this kind of grumbling so seriously (compare Numbers 14:22; Psalm 95:8–9)?
2. Israel had walked through a split sea and gathered bread from heaven, yet one dry camp erased it all and turned them to quarreling. Where does a present hardship tempt you to forget all that God has already done and to doubt that He is with you?
3. Read 17:5–7. God tells Moses to strike the rock, and water gushes out for the whole nation to drink. Paul later says that the Rock was Christ and that they drank from Him (1 Corinthians 10:1–4). How does this miracle of water from the rock point us to Jesus, the One who gives living water to all who thirst (John 7:37–39)?
4. Moses named the place Massah (testing) and Meribah (quarreling) so the memory of Israel's failure would not be lost. What hard place in your own walk has tested whether you would trust God or turn on Him, and what did it reveal about your heart?

5. Read 17:8–13. As long as Moses held up his hands, Israel prevailed, but when they sank, Amalek prevailed. What does this teach about Israel's true source of victory, and about the dependence of God's people on Him rather than on their own strength and weapons (compare Psalm 20:7; Zechariah 4:6)?

6. Moses' arms grew heavy, and he needed Aaron and Hur to hold them up. Are you willing to admit when your hands are sinking, or does pride keep you fighting alone? What would it look like this week to let brothers and sisters hold up your hands in prayer and support?

7. Read 17:11–13. Aaron and Hur did not fight on the front line; they held up the hands of God's servant, and the victory came through that quiet, persevering help. How does this picture the importance of persevering intercession and of every member of the body helping one another in the Lord's work (compare 1 Thessalonians 5:11; Galatians 6:2)?

8. Holding up another man's arms from morning until sunset is tiring, unglamorous, unseen work. Where is God calling you to a quiet, behind-the-scenes ministry of support, and are you willing to be an Aaron or a Hur even when no one notices?

9. Read 18:13–23. Jethro warns that Moses cannot carry the whole load alone and urges him to choose able men who fear God, who are trustworthy and hate dishonest gain, to share the work of leading and judging the people. How does this God-honoring pattern of shared, qualified leadership among faithful men help us understand the wisdom of a plurality of qualified men sharing the work and oversight in the Lord's church (compare Acts 6:1–4; 1 Timothy 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9)?

10. Look back across this whole passage, from thirst at the rock, to the battle with upheld hands, to the wise sharing of the burden. Name one specific way Jesus is forming you through it, whether to drink from Him when you are dry, to let others hold up your hands, or to share the load humbly instead of carrying it all alone.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: 1 Corinthians 10:1–4, where Paul says the spiritual Rock that gave Israel water was Christ; John 7:37–39, where Jesus invites the thirsty to come to Him and receive living water; Hebrews 3:7–19, which warns Christians not to harden their hearts as Israel did at Meribah; Galatians 6:2, which calls us to bear one another's burdens as Aaron and Hur bore up Moses' hands; Acts 6:1–4, where the apostles share the work with qualified, Spirit-filled men so the ministry of the word can flourish.

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