

INTRODUCTION TO EXODUS CHAPTER 17

Two passages of story are recorded in this chapter,

I. The watering of the host of Israel.

1. In the wilderness they wanted water, **#Ex 17:1**.
2. In their want they chided Moses, **#Ex 17:2-3**.
3. Moses cried to God, **#Ex 17:4**.
4. God ordered him to smite the rock, and fetch water out of that; Moses did so, **#Ex 17:5-6**.
5. The place named from it, **#Ex 17:7**.

II. The defeating of the host of Amalek.

1. The victory obtained by the prayer of Moses, **#Ex 17:8-12**.
2. By the sword of Joshua, **#Ex 17:13**.
3. A record kept of it, **#Ex 17:14,16**. And these things which happened to them are written for our instruction in our spiritual journey and warfare.

Ver. 1.

Here is,

I. The strait that the children of Israel were in for want of water; once before they were in the like distress, and now, a second time, **#Ex 17:1**. They journeyed *according to the commandment of the Lord*, led by the pillar of cloud and fire, and yet they came to a place where there was no water for them to drink. Note, We may be in the way of our duty, and yet may meet with troubles, which Providence brings us into for the trial of our faith, and that God may be glorified in our relief.

II. Their discontent and distrust in this strait. It is said (**#Ex 17:3**), They *thirsted there for water*. If they had no water to drink, they must needs thirst; but this intimates, not only that they wanted water and felt the inconvenience of that want, but that their passion sharpened their appetites and they were violent and impatient in their desire; their thirst made them outrageous. Natural desires, and those that are most craving, have need to be kept under the check and control of religion and reason. See what was the language of this inordinate desire.

1. They challenged Moses to supply them (**#Ex 17:2**): *Give us water, that we may drink*, demanding it as a debt, and strongly suspecting that he was not able to discharge it. Because they were supplied with bread, they insist upon it that they must be supplied with water too; and indeed to those that by faith and prayer live a life of dependence upon God one favour is an earnest of another, and may be humbly pleaded; but the unthankful and unbelieving have reason to think that the abuse of former favours is the forfeiture of further favours: *Let not them think that they shall receive any thing* (**#Jas 1:7**), yet they are ready to demand every thing.

2. They quarrelled with him for bringing them out of Egypt, as if, instead of delivering them, he designed to murder them, than which nothing could be more base and invidious, #Ex 17:3. Many that have not only designed well, but done well, for their generation, have had their best services thus misconstrued, and their patience thereby tried, by unthinking unthankful people. To such a degree their malice against Moses rose that they were *almost ready to stone him*, #Ex 17:4. *Many good works he had shown them*; and for which of these would they stone him? #Joh 10:32. Ungoverned passions, provoked by the crossing of unbridled appetites, sometimes make men guilty of the greatest absurdities, and act like madmen, that cast firebrands, arrows, and death, among their best friends.

3. They began to question whether God were with them or not: They *tempted the Lord*, saying,

"Is the Lord among us or not? #Ex 17:7. Is Jehovah among us by that name by which he made himself known to us in Egypt?"

They question his essential presence--whether there was a God or not; his common providence--whether that God governed the world; and his special promise--whether he would be as good as his word to them. This is called their *tempting God*, which signifies, not only a distrust of God in general, but a distrust of him after they had received such proofs of his power and goodness, for the confirmation of his promise. They do, in effect, suppose that Moses was an impostor, Aaron a deceiver, the pillar of cloud and fire a mere sham and illusion, which imposed upon their senses, that long series of miracles which had rescued them, served them, and fed them, a chain of cheats, and the promise of Canaan a banter upon them; it was all so, if *the Lord was not among them*. Note, It is a great provocation to God for us to question his presence, providence, or promise, especially for his Israel to do it, who are so peculiarly bound to trust him.

III. The course that Moses took, when he was thus set upon, and insulted.

1. He reproved the murmurers (#Ex 17:2): *Why chide you with me?* Observe how mildly he answered them; it was well that he was a man of extraordinary meekness, else their tumultuous conduct would have made him lose the possession of himself: it is folly to answer passion with passion, for that makes bad worse; but *soft answers turn away wrath*. He showed them whom their murmurings reflected upon, and that the reproaches they cast on him fell on God himself: *You tempt the Lord*; that is,

"By distrusting his power, you try his patience, and so provoke his wrath."

2. He made his complaint to God (#Ex 17:4): *Moses cried unto the Lord*. This servant came, and showed his Lord all these things, #Lu 14:21. When men unjustly censure us and quarrel with us, it will be a great relief to us to go to God, and by prayer lay the case before him and leave it with him: if men will not hear us, God will; if their bad conduct towards us ruffle our spirits, God's consolations will compose them. Moses begs of God to direct him what he should do, for he was utterly at a loss; he could not of himself either supply their want or pacify their tumult; God only could do it. He pleads his own peril:

"They are almost ready to stone me; Lord, if thou hast any regard to the life of thy poor servant, interpose now."

IV. God's gracious appearance for their relief, #Ex 17:5-6. He orders Moses to go on

before the people, and venture himself in his post, though they spoke of stoning him. He must take his rod with him, not (as God might justly have ordered) to summon some plague or other to chastise them for their distrust and murmuring, but to fetch water for their supply. O the wonderful patience and forbearance of God towards provoking sinners! He loads those with benefits that make him to serve with their sins, maintains those that are at war with him, and reaches out the hand of his bounty to those that lift up the heel against him. Thus he teaches us, if our enemy hunger, to feed him, and if he thirst, as Israel did now, *to give him drink*, #Ro 12:20; Mt 5:44-45. Will he fail those that trust him, when he was so liberal even to those that tempted him? If God had only shown Moses a fountain of water in the wilderness, as he did Hagar not far hence (#Ge 21:19), that would have been a great favour; but that he might show his power as well as his pity, and make it a miracle of mercy, he gave them water out of a rock. He directed Moses whither to go, and appointed him to take some of the elders of Israel with him, to be witnesses of what was done, that they might themselves be satisfied, and might satisfy others, of the certainty of God's presence with them. He promised to meet him there in the cloud of glory (to encourage him), and ordered him to smite the rock; Moses obeyed, and immediately water came out of the rock in great abundance, which ran throughout the camp in streams and rivers #Ps 78:15-16, and followed them wherever they went in that wilderness: it is called a fountain of waters, #Ps 114:8. God showed the care he took of his people in giving them water when they wanted it; he showed his power in fetching the water out of a rock; and he put an honour upon Moses in appointing the water to flow out upon his smiting the rock. This fair water, that came out of the rock, is called honey and oil #De 32:13, because the people's thirst made it doubly pleasant; coming when they were in extreme want, it was like honey and oil to them. It is probable that the people digged canals for the conveyance of it, and pools for the reception of it, in like manner as, long afterwards, passing through the valley of Baca, they made it a well, #Ps 84:6 Nu 21:18. Let this direct us to live in a dependence,

1. Upon God's providence, even in the greatest straits and difficulties. God can open fountains for our supply where we least expect them, waters in the wilderness #Isa 43:20, because he makes a way in the wilderness, #Isa 43:19. Those who, in this wilderness, keep to God's way, may trust him to provide for them. While we follow the pillar of cloud and fire, surely goodness and mercy shall follow us, like the water out of the rock.
2. Upon Christ's grace: That rock was Christ, #1Co 10:4. The graces and comforts of the Spirit are compared to rivers of living water, #Joh 7:38-39; 4:14. These flow from Christ, who is the rock smitten by the law of Moses, for he was made under the law. Nothing will supply the needs, and satisfy the desires, of a soul, but water out of this rock, this fountain opened. The pleasures of sense are puddle water; spiritual delights are rock water, so pure, so clear, so refreshing--rivers of pleasure.

V. A new name was, upon this occasion, given to the place, preserving the remembrance, not of the mercy of their supply (the water that followed them was sufficient to do that), but of the sin of their murmuring--Massah, temptation, because they tempted God; Meribah, strife, because they chid with Moses, #Ex 17:7. There was thus a remembrance kept of sin, both for the disgrace of the sinners themselves (sin leaves a blot upon the name) and for warning to their seed to take heed of sinning after the similitude of their transgression.

Ver. 8.

We have here the story of the war with Amalek, which, we may suppose, was the first that was recorded in the book of the wars of the Lord, #Nu 21:14. Amalek was the first of the nations that Israel fought with, #Nu 24:20. Observe,

I. Amalek's attempt: They came out, and fought with Israel, **#Ex 17:8**. The Amalekites were the posterity of Esau, who hated Jacob because of the birthright and blessing, and this was an effort of the hereditary enmity, a malice that ran in the blood, and perhaps was now exasperated by the working of the promise towards an accomplishment. Consider this,

1. As Israel's affliction. They had been quarrelling with Moses **#Ex 17:2**, and now God sends Amalekites to quarrel with them; wars abroad are the just punishment of strifes and discontents at home.
2. As Amalek's sin; so it is reckoned, **#De 25:17-18**. They did not boldly front them as a generous enemy, but without any provocation given by Israel, or challenge given to them, basely fell upon their rear, and smote those that were faint and feeble and could neither make resistance nor escape. Herein they bade defiance to that power which had so lately ruined the Egyptians; but in vain did they attack a camp guarded and victualled by miracles: verily they knew not what they did.

II. Israel's engagement with Amalek, in their own necessary defence against the aggressors. Observe,

1. The post assigned to Joshua, of whom this is the first mention: he is nominated commander in chief in this expedition, that he might be trained up to the services he was designed for after the death of Moses, and be a man of war from his youth. He is ordered to draw out a detachment of choice men from the thousands of Israel and to drive back the Amalekites, **#Ex 17:9**. When the Egyptians pursued them Israel must stand still and see what God would do; but now it was required that they should bestir themselves. Note: God is to be trusted in the use of means.
2. The post assumed by Moses: I will stand on the top of the hill with the rod of God in my hand, **#Ex 17:9**. See how God qualifies his people for, and calls them to, various services for the good of his church: Joshua fights, Moses prays, and both minister to Israel. Moses went up to the top of the hill, and placed himself, probably, so as to be seen by Israel; there he held up the rod of God in his hand, that wonder working rod which had summoned the plagues of Egypt, and under which Israel had passed out of the house of bondage. This rod Moses held up to Israel, to animate them; the rod was held up as the banner to encourage the soldiers, who might look up, and say,

“Yonder is the rod, and yonder the hand that used it, when such glorious things were wrought for us.”

Note: It tends much to the encouragement of faith to reflect upon the great things God has done for us, and review the monuments of his favours. Moses also held up this rod to God, by way of appeal to him:

“Is not the battle the Lord's? Is not he able to help, and engaged to help? Witness this rod, the voice of which, thus held up, is **#Isa 51:9-10**, Put on strength, O arm of the Lord; art not thou it that hath cut Rahab?”

Moses was not only a standard bearer, but an intercessor, pleading with God for success and victory. Note: When the host goes forth against the enemy earnest prayers should be made to the God of hosts for his presence with them. It is here the praying legion that proves the thundering legion. There, in Salem, in Sion where prayers were made, there the victory was won, there broke the arrows of the bow, **#Ps 76:2-3**. Observe,

(1.) How Moses was tired **#Ex 17:12**: His hands were heavy. The strongest arm will fail with being long extended; it is God only whose hand is stretched out still. We do not find that Joshua's hands were heavy in fighting, but Moses's hands were heavy in praying. The more spiritual any service is the more apt we are to fail and flag in it. Praying work, if done with due intensesness of mind and vigour of affection, will be found hard work, and, though the spirit be willing, the flesh will be weak. Our great Intercessor in heaven faints not, nor is he weary, though he attends continually to this very thing.

(2.) What influence the rod of Moses had upon the battle **#Ex 17:11**: When Moses held up his hand in prayer (so the Chaldee explains it) Israel prevailed, but, when he let down his hand from prayer, Amalek prevailed. To convince Israel that the hand of Moses (with whom they had just now been chiding) contributed more to their safety than their own hands, his rod than their sword, the success rises and falls as Moses lifts up or lets down his hands. It seems, the scale wavered for some time, before it turned on Israel's side. Even the best cause must expect disappointments as an alloy to its successes; though the battle be the Lord's, Amalek may prevail for a time. The reason was, Moses let down his hands. Note: The church's cause is, commonly, more or less successful according as the church's friends are more or less strong in faith and fervent in prayer.

(3.) The care that was taken for the support of Moses. When he could not stand any longer he sat down, not in a chair of state, but upon a stone **#Ex 17:12**; when he could not hold up his hands, he would have them held up. Moses, the man of God, is glad of the assistance of Aaron his brother, and Hur, who, some think, was his brother-in-law, the husband of Miriam. We should not be shy either of asking help from others or giving help to others, for we are members one of another. Moses's hands, thus stayed, were steady till the going down of the sun; and, though it was with much ado that he held out, yet his willing mind was accepted. No doubt it was a great encouragement to the people to see Joshua before them in the field of battle and Moses above them upon the top of the hill: Christ is both to us--our Joshua, the captain of our salvation who fights our battles, and our Moses, who, in the upper world, ever lives making intercession, that our faith fail not.

III. The defeat of Amalek. Victory had hovered awhile between the camps; sometimes Israel prevailed and sometimes Amalek, but Israel carried the day, **#Ex 17:13**. Though Joshua fought with great disadvantages--his soldiers undisciplined, ill armed, long inured to servitude, and apt to murmur; yet by them God wrought a great salvation, and made Amalek pay dearly for his insolence. Note: Weapons formed against God's Israel cannot prosper long, and shall be broken at last. The cause of God and his Israel will be victorious. Though God gave the victory, yet it is said, Joshua discomfited Amalek, because Joshua was a type of Christ, and of the same name, and in him it is that we are more than conquerors. It was his arm alone that spoiled principalities and powers, and routed all their force.

IV. The trophies of this victory set up.

1. Moses took care that God should have the glory of it **#Ex 17:15**; instead of setting up a triumphal arch, to the honour of Joshua (though it had been a laudable policy to put marks of honour upon him), he builds an altar to the honour of God, and we may suppose it was not an altar without sacrifice; but that which is most carefully recorded is the inscription upon the altar, Jehovahnissi--The Lord is my banner, which probably refers to the lifting up of the rod of God as a banner in this action. The presence and power of Jehovah were the banner under which they enlisted, by which they were animated and kept together, and therefore which they erected in the day of their triumph. In the name of our God we must always lift up our banners, **#Ps**

20:5. It is fit that he who does all the work should have all the praise.

2. God took care that posterity should have the comfort and benefit of it:

``Write this for a memorial, not in loose papers, but in a book, write it, and then rehearse it in the ears of Joshua, let him be entrusted with this memorial, to transmit it to the generations to come."

Moses must now begin to keep a diary or journal of occurrences; it is the first mention of writing that we find in scripture, and perhaps the command was not given till after the writing of the law upon the tables of stone:

``Write it in perpetuum rei memoriam--that the event may be had in perpetual remembrance; that which is written remains."

(1.)

``Write what has been done, what Amalek has done against Israel; write in gall their bitter hatred, write in blood their cruel attempts, let them never be forgotten, nor yet what God has done for Israel in saving them from Amalek. Let ages to come know that God fights for his people, and he that touches them touches the apple of his eye."

(2.) Write what shall be done.

[1.] That in process of time Amalek shall be totally ruined and rooted out **#Ex 17:14**, that he shall be remembered only in history. Amalek would have cut off the name of Israel, that it might be no more in remembrance **#Ps 83:4,7**; and therefore God not only disappoints him in this, but cuts off his name.

``Write it for the encouragement of Israel, whenever the Amalekites are an annoyance to them, that Israel will at last undoubtedly triumph in the fall of Amalek."

This sentence was executed in part by Saul (1 Samuel 15), and completely by David **#1Sa 30:1 2Sa 1:1 2Sa 8:12**; after his time we never read so much as of the name of Amalek.

[2.] This is the mean time God would have a continual controversy with him **#Ex 17:16**: Because his hand is upon the throne of the Lord, that is, against the camp of Israel in which the Lord ruled, which was the place of his sanctuary, and is therefore called a glorious high throne from the beginning **#Jer 17:12**; therefore the Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation. This was written for direction to Israel never to make any league with the Amalekites, but to look upon them as irreconcilable enemies, doomed to ruin. Amalek's destruction was typical of the destruction of all the enemies of Christ and his kingdom. Whoever make war with the Lamb, the Lamb will overcome them.