

Exodus 17:1-7 // Christ Our Rock

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[0 : 00] And we're looking at two different passages tonight. So we're starting in Exodus 17 and then we'll be looking in 1 Corinthians as well. So I'm going to start reading Exodus chapter 17, verse 1 to 7.

It's on page 75 in the Bibles in front of you. I'll give you a wee moment. Exodus chapter 17. The whole Israelite community set out from the desert of sin, traveling from place to place as the Lord commanded.

They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. So they quarreled with Moses and said, give us water to drink. Moses replied, why do you quarrel with me?

Why do you put the Lord to the test? But the people were thirsty for water there and they grumbled against Moses. They said, why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?

Then Moses cried out to the Lord, what am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me. The Lord answered Moses, go out in front of the people.

[1 : 13] Take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile and go. I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb.

Strike the rock and the water will come out of it for the people to drink. So Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel. And he called the place Massah and Meribah because the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the Lord saying, is the Lord among us or not?

And then we're going to turn to 1 Corinthians chapter 10, which is on page 1151. So if you want to keep a finger in Exodus 17 and then turn over.

Okay. 1 Corinthians chapter 10, verses 1 to 13. For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud and they all passed through the sea.

They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them.

[2 : 30] And that rock was Christ. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them. Their bodies were scattered in the wilderness. Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did.

Do not be idolaters as some of them were. As it's written, the people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry. We should not commit sexual immorality as some of them did.

And in one day, 23,000 of them died. We should not test Christ as some of them did. And were killed by snakes.

And do not grumble as some of them did. And were killed by the destroying angel. These things happened to them as examples. And were written down as warnings for us.

On whom the culmination of the ages has come. So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall. No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind.

[3 : 36] And God is faithful. He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.

Amen. Well, thanks very much for reading for us.

Please keep Exodus chapter 17 open in front of you. That would be a great help. It's a real pleasure to be here at St Silas this evening. Thanks so much for having me. And thank you particularly for your support of Andy and Rachel.

It means a huge much, so much to them. And I can assure you they're doing wonderful, wonderful ministry in Zambia. So, thank you. Shall I pray? And then we'll look at God's word together.

Those words from 1 Corinthians 10. If you think you're standing firm, be careful that you don't fall. Heavenly Father, as we study your word together this evening, we pray that by your spirit you'd speak to our hearts and you would encourage us and you'd strengthen us to serve Christ faithfully. [4 : 49] And in his name we pray. Amen. There's a bit of a handout on the service sheet. There's a few mistakes in it that I'll point out as we go along.

48 hours ago, I was sat in Palma Airport in Mallorca, having had a really fun week there with my family. I'm not sure if you've been to Mallorca, but the north of the island, there in this rocky outcrop just off the coast of Spain in the Mediterranean, I can assure you it's a dry, rocky, quite harsh wilderness.

Although there are a few smatterings of olive trees, and, sorry, fruit trees, olive groves, and some rather hardy sheep that we noticed on our holiday. In a previous age, you can imagine that it was a really challenging place to live.

In the height of summer, it was hot and arid. It was a hard place to be. You could say it was a challenge to live in rather than a vacation to enjoy.

And if you're visiting us here this evening like I am, we're continuing a sermon series in this book of Exodus. And Exodus is a story of a rescue, the redemption of God's people who were in slavery but are now set free.

[6 : 13] Yet their journey, it's proving to be a bit of a challenge rather than a vacation, not least because they too were walking through a hot, arid wilderness.

800,000 men, women, and children stuck in a desert with nothing to drink. Have a look down to verse one, if you have your Bible open.

Verse one, we read, the whole Israelite community set out from the desert of Sin, traveling from place to place as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink.

I wonder if you can remember the last time when you were thirsty. And I mean really thirsty. Just saying that, I'm starting to get thirsty. It's a bit embarrassing.

Maybe you were on holiday in a hot place. Maybe you were running a marathon. Maybe you'd forgotten your water bottle as you were studying in the library. Many years ago, I served with the armed forces in the Middle East.

[7 : 18] And the country that I was working in was so hot, we'd have to finish work by midday because it was so hot and we became so thirsty. I doubt though, any of us here this evening have experienced the hot, arid wilderness that the people of Israel were feeling in our passage.

It was a harsh place to be. And we see they are asking, give us water to drink. And yet if this all sounds rather familiar because you've been here for the last couple of weeks, you're thinking, I'm sure I've read this before.

And that's because we have. What we're reading in Exodus 17, 1 to 7 is almost an exact repeat of what has already taken place. It's just two chapters earlier on in chapter 15.

Do glance back to it if you'd like to. There from verse 22 onwards, the people were in another desert. Then it was the desert of Shur. And not only could they not find water, verse 22, when they did find some, it was not fit to drink.

The people grumbled. There was no water, drinking water for them. And yet we read chapter 15, verse 25, God had miraculously turned bitter, salty water into fresh drinking water for them all, all 800,000 of them.

[8 : 47] Incredible. And then in the next chapter, chapter 16, which we don't have time to really look at this evening, when the people there complained that they had nothing to eat, God caused a supernatural bread called manna to fall from the sky, which would appear regular as clockwork each morning.

Chapter 16, verse 4. And because God is so kind, and the God of the Bible believes in a balanced diet, each evening protein was also provided to supplement their carbohydrates.

Meat was miraculously provided. Have a look at chapter 16 and verse 11, because we read there, the Lord said to Moses, I've heard the grumbling of the Israelites.

Tell them at twilight you will eat meat, and in the morning you will be filled with bread. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God. God was clearly looking after his people, just as he promised when he rescued them from Egypt.

But more than just looking after them, he was teaching them such a valuable lesson. He was teaching them to trust him. Whether it was the equality of the sufficiency of the food that they enjoyed, chapter 16, verse 18, or that on the sixth day of the week, they were to collect double, verse 22, so they could then relax and take the day off on the Sabbath, God was teaching his people the lesson of trust.

[10:20] So you might think, by the time we come to chapter 17, the people of God would have learnt their lesson. A lesson that all Christian people need to learn.

To trust, rather than to test God. To trust that God can provide, no matter how bleak, or uncertain, or challenging the circumstances we find ourselves in.

That the way to deal with any crisis in our lives is not to turn on God and grumble, but to turn to him in trust as we pray.

But the Israelites, sadly they haven't learnt that lesson yet. As one writer has put it, there is a sense of *deja vu* all over again as we arrive in chapter 17.

Instead of learning from God's past provision, and so trusting him for the present, God's people grumble, and they put him to the test. And friends, if you are following the Lord Jesus here this evening, this challenge remains for us too.

[11:32] You see, when the circumstances of our lives are hard, or not as we expect, or the darkness that we're facing seems rarely to lift, how many of us in those moments have turned on God rather than turned to him?

And that's a terrible way to treat the God of the Bible. But as there was hope for them then, what we're going to see this evening, that there is hope for us in Christ.

And let's see that as we look at just these seven verses together under two headings. Our first heading is the grumbling people, and it's going to get pretty dark here.

The grumbling people. Verse one, I studied geography many years ago. It gives us two geographical details, which is always interesting. One is not so important. One is. I don't think you should read too much into the reference to the desert of sin.

It just happens to be the name of the place in the wilderness. Where this is taking place. However, Rephidim, the place name where they're camping in verse one, is important.

[12:42] Because Rephidim means resting place. Resting place. But rather than resting, the people have complained, or quarreled, or grumbled.

And they do that in three particular ways. And this is the first of the corrections on the handout. First, they demand God's provision. They demand God's provision.

Let me read verse two. So they quarreled with Moses and said, give us water to drink. Moses replied, why do you quarrel with me?

Why do you put the Lord to the test? Now this word quarreled suggests that their grumbling has reached to a new level, a new level of hostility.

And whilst it seems on the surface to be a revolt against Moses and his authority, it's clear that their problem is really with God. They pick an argument with Moses, but really it's an argument with God.

[13:43] For as we read in the detail of verse one, it was the Lord who had been commanding them where to go, directing them, as we read verse one, from place to place.

Their complaint was therefore against God. He was the one who'd been put on trial. He was in the dock. And this is precisely how the psalmist, King David, understood what was taking place here. Later on, when you're back home and sitting in the bath with a cup of hot milk, in Psalm 95, we read these words. It's like a commentary on the incident here.

King David says, Do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah, as you did that day at Massa in the wilderness, where your ancestors tested me, they tried me, though they had seen what I did. Your footnotes will give you the meaning for Meribah and Massa. But David is saying, Look, what took place in that desert of sin was that the ancestors tested God.

[14:43] They tried him, though they had seen what he'd done. And I suppose this quarreling with God, this testing of him, reminds us of what lies at the heart of all our dissatisfactions and complaints.

It's our problem with God. A problem of the human heart that has existed right from the beginning of time, since that very first human rebellion.

Grumbling, quarreling, testing. It's so serious, for it is a proud declaration of autonomy that declares we know best rather than God.

And it's seen here in their demand for provision. Give us water to drink. Verse 2. It's a remarkable demand in the light of the previous two chapters.

God has generously provided. He's come through precisely with what they need at precisely the right time. His track record of provision is faultless. His timing is to a T.

[15:52] And yet in their rebellion, they put God on trial and demand from him according to their own terms. And sadly, I have to confess, I'm the same, and I'm sure you are too, on occasions.

In the wilderness of our lives, the possible mess of our circumstances, we demand that God provides on our terms and not his.

We demand God's provision. But the grumbling gets worse. The second we see they deny God's protection. They deny God's protection. Let me read verse 3.

But the people were thirsty for water there, and they grumbled against Moses. They said, Why did you bring us up out of Egypt and make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?

Sin number two is the people denying God's protection. As is often the case, the challenges of the immediate cause them to forget all that has gone before.

[17:01] And here the people forget the backstory to God's redemption of them from slavery in Egypt. If you've been here on previous Sundays, you'd have had it spelt out to you. And do you remember all the way back in chapter 1, you might remember that the people of Israel's life was utterly, utterly, utterly miserable.

Made to work ruthlessly. A nation whose firstborn males were subject to infanticide. They cried out to God for rescue and relief.

And as you read on in the book of Exodus, you see that God comes through. He provides their salvation. And yet, the historical forgetfulness that we read of in verse 3 is an indication of their spiritual waywardness.

Complaining about what God is doing in the present as they ignore the sovereignty of God at work in the past. It's a grim, grim picture.

It's a picture of rebellion that so many of us are guilty of. How often we complain about what God is doing or not doing in the present.

[18:14] Getting in the way or not getting involved. Forsaking as we do the vast backdrop of God's goodness and faithfulness and love to us in every aspect of our lives.

Francis Schaeffer has succinctly put it like this. The central problem is always in the midst of the people of God. Not in the circumstances surrounding them.

Which leads to sin number 3. And this is doubting God's presence. That was the other mistake on the handout. Doubting God's presence. Let me read from verse 7.

And he called the place Massah and Meribah because the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the Lord saying is the Lord among us or not?

Are you really there God? You don't seem to be. No water. Have you forgotten us? An ever present help in times of trouble.

[19:18] We don't think so. As Psalm 106 puts it, they forgot the God who saves them. They doubt God's presence.

Corrie Ten Boom was a survivor of the Holocaust and she's written beautifully and she wrote these words. Often I've heard people say how good God is.

We prayed that it would not rain for our church picnic and look at this lovely weather. Yes, God is good when he sends good weather but God was also good when he allowed my sister Betsy to starve to death before my eyes in the German concentration camp.

I remember on one occasion when I was very discouraged there everything around us was dark and there was darkness in my heart. I remember telling Betsy that I thought God had forgotten us. No, Corrie, said Betsy, he has not forgotten us. Remember his word for as the heavens are high above the earth so great is his steadfast love towards those who fear him.

[20:26] There is an ocean of God's love available. There's plenty for everyone. May God grant you never to doubt that victorious love whatever the circumstances you face.

Exodus 17 is a true horror story of God's grumbling people. They demand God's provision but he provided for them the sweet water and the bread of heaven in chapters 15 and 16.

That they denied God's protection even though he had defeated the mightiest army of the world. They doubted God's presence.

The one who went before them in a cloudy pillar at day and a fiery column at night. And friends, how easy it is for each one of us to display the same symptoms of spiritual amnesia as they did. So much of the time we ignore God. We hardly give him a thought. We're quick to forget his track record of faithfulness even though he's always looking after us, always providing for us.

[21 : 45] As soon as things go wrong, maybe we fail an exam. We get sick. We lose someone we love. We fail to get the job or the spouse that we hoped for.

And we blame him. Why have you let this happen to me? Why? It's not fair. God, you don't care for me. It's the grotesqueness of God's grumbling people.

And yet, the surprise of this passage and the surprise that lies at the heart of the Christian gospel is what God does in response.

And it's our second heading and hopefully it's a bit more cheery because what we see is his gracious provision. Let me read verse five. The Lord answered Moses, Go out in front of the people, take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile and go.

Picture the scene with me in your mind's eye. The Israelites, all 800,000 of them are camped around this rock and God tells Moses to pick up his staff. Now, I was thinking of bringing a hockey stick with me this evening but I didn't think that would go down well in British Airways on my hand luggage last night so I didn't.

[23 : 09] But imagine I had a staff here. Now, this staff as the verse reminds us is the staff that struck the Nile and turned it into blood. In fact, it's the staff that executed all of God's plagues that he sent on Egypt.

So you could call it the staff of God's judgments. When this staff strikes, bad stuff happens. So again, imagine the scene with me.

We're Israelites. We've been complaining against God despite all he's done for us the last 16 chapters or so and now on God's orders, Moses is standing out in front of us with the staff of God's judgments.

What do you expect him to do next? It's obvious, isn't it? We expect God to tell Moses to strike us with the staff so that bad stuff happens to us to get what we deserve as God's grumbling people. But instead, look what happens. It's absolutely remarkable. Verse 6, I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb, strike the rock and water will come out of it for the people to drink.

[24 : 30] Now the translation slightly loses the sense of it but God in some way he identifies himself with the rock. He stands there in front of it or on top of it or by it.

Presumably he's invisible or maybe he appears in some way like a shining cloud but he identifies himself, he invests himself in the rock and then he tells Moses not to strike the Israelites for their sin but instead to strike him.

God submits himself to his own rod of judgments. He takes the hit from his own hockey stick, his own staff and from that act of judgment do you see what happens?

Water. Buckets and buckets and buckets of it pour out for the Israelites to drink. What gracious provision. Psalm 78 describes it.

He gave them water as abundant as the seas. Now no wonder the apostle Paul writing sort of 1500 years later said that that rock 1 Corinthians 10 was Christ.

[25 : 50] Think about it. Jesus is God and on the cross he takes the judgment the punishment that our sin deserves. It's why he cries out doesn't he that cry of dereliction my God my God why have you forsaken me as the staff of God's judgment that we'll deserve falls on him.

and just as that rock at Horeb broke open and water gushed out for the thirsty Israelites so Jesus on the cross he was broken open and forgiveness and love and life gushed out for thirsty people everywhere here in this city and for people all over the world.

as one writer so helpfully puts it at the cross the staff of God's wrath could have come down on the world in its worst moment of sin killing God's son but instead it falls on Christ not us as a result God's blessing flows out to us life to the full God the father struck God the son so that God the spirit might be poured out on his people.

I'm about to finish but let me close with this whoever we are this evening we all have thirst not just a physical thirst like the Israelites or the marathon runner but a spiritual thirst deep down we long for love and for meaning and satisfaction and we try and quench that thirst thirst with created things good things like friends and family and money and pleasure but somehow they don't quite make or

meet the need that's why we can come from a loving home have great friends enjoy lovely holidays in Mallorca have hobbies and all the gadgets but still feel empty and insecure inside because we're made for more friends and only Jesus provides that as he speaks to that woman at the well in John chapter 4 and says everyone who drinks this water the physical water will be thirsty again but whoever drinks the water

I give them will never thirst indeed the water I give them will become in them a spring of water bubbling up to eternal life you see in Christ God has graciously provided for us if you're not yet a follower of his please would you come on this life explored course he offers you so much for all those who will put their trust in him not only for his divine protection but for all eternity he gives us himself he gives us his presence his is a truly gracious provision so whoever we are this evening let's return to Christ the rock for only in him do we have everything we need for life in the wilderness please would you bow your heads and I'll lead us in a prayer some words from the end of

[29 : 29] Romans chapter 8 if God is for us who can be against us he who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all how will he not also along with him graciously give us all things father as we reflect again on the wonder of your gracious provision of your son the Lord Jesus how you did not spare him but gave him up so he might take the full wrath of your judgment at the cross thank you that as we look to him and your grace towards us through him we can be assured Lord that you will never leave us you'll never forsake us no matter how hard the wilderness is that we're travelling through at the moment thank you that in him we can be assured of your provision your protection and your presence help us to be those who do not test you but trust you and we pray that for our good but ultimately for your glory in Jesus name

Amen