

Desert Grumbles

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[0:00] I would like us to read together and then look at chapter 17 of Exodus, page 75 of the Pew Bible, Exodus chapter 17.

And this morning we looked at Exodus chapter 14. And then of course we know the deliverance that they received. They got through the cross to Red Sea, then we have a song of Miriam and Moses, and then we have various accounts of water that they received and manna and quail that was provided for them.

So we're going to read in chapter 17 as the story continues. The whole Israelite community set out from the desert of Sin, travelling from place to place as the Lord commanded.

They camped at Refidim, but there was no water for the people to drink, so they quarrelled 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?

[1:18] 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, walk on ahead of the people and take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile and go.

And I will stand there before you by the rock of Choreb. Strike the rock and 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 Masha and Meriba because the Israelites quarrelled and because they tested the Lord saying, is the Lord among us or not?

The Amalekites came and attacked the Israelites at Refidim. Moses said to Joshua, choose some of our men and go out to fight the Amalekites. So I will stand on top of the hill with the staff of God in my hands.

So Joshua fought the Amalekites as Moses had ordered and Moses, Aaron and her went to the top of the hill. As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning.

But whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning. When Moses hands grew tired, they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it.

[2:43] Aaron and her held his hands up, one on one side and one on the other, so that his hands remained steady till sunset. So Joshua overcame the Amalekite army with the sword.

Then the Lord said to Moses, write this on a scroll as something to be remembered and make sure that Joshua hears it because I will meet, I will completely blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.

Moses built an altar and called it, the Lord is my banner. He said, for hands were lifted up to the throne of the Lord. The Lord will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation.

I want to look at this passage this evening and deal with it fairly similarly to the way that we looked at the passage this morning. The story simply as it is, as a factual account of what was happening between Israel and their God and also what was happening as they journeyed beyond the crossing of the Red Sea to claim the Promised Land.

And what is interesting again about this account is how much it parallels with our own spiritual account of life. As a Christian, we saw this morning that crossing the Red Sea was similar to the deliverance that we've received as Christians from God, that were taken from the slavery of sin into the freedom of our relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

[4 : 22] And there are great parallels between the physical and actual account here and between our own spiritual lives and our own thinking and our own characters.

And it's part of the Israelites' trouble was trust and believing God. And that remains for us a great problem, trusting God's word, believing God against all the odds.

The sea was in front of them, the Egyptian army was behind them, could they trust God to deliver them? Was he big enough? Was he miraculous enough?

Was he strong enough to fulfill his promises that he would take them from slavery? They found adequately that he was more than adequately and they're set free from the oppression of the Egyptian people.

But here we come to part of the journey and they're struggling with their freedom. It's not immediately what they thought it would be. And they're beginning to wish they were still back in slavery.

[5 : 35] They're beginning to wish it was they were still in control of their short and miserable and oppressed lives. But at least they were in control.

And they got up in the morning and they tried to build bricks with straw and they were whipped and beaten. But they went home and they had a little bit of food and they went to bed at night and that was suiting them.

And now they're free and they're under the Lordship of God and they don't like it. They can't cope with the freedom. Some of you may have seen the film *The Shawshank Redemption*.

I'm sure many of you have. There's an old character in that film, a lovely old man called Brooks. And he's an institutionalized prisoner.

He's been in prison nearly all his growing life. And eventually after years and years of appearing before the parole board every year, never getting parole, eventually in his 70s he gets parole.

[6 : 36] He gets out and he's dressed in a suit, you know, as he leaves the prison. He only has one bag with him at all his earthly possessions. And the whole world has changed, of course, in the time that he's been in prison.

And he feels the whole world is moving so fast. And he nearly gets run over by cars on the road and he's trying to work in a supermarket and he can't cope with the rudeness of the staff.

And he's too slow in his work. And he's in a little bed and breakfast kind of place on his own and the landlady's not very kind to him.

He's got nobody. He can't cope with the freedom that he's been given and he takes his own life. And that's a very drastic picture and it doesn't really parallel in many ways except that similarly we struggle to cope with the freedom of the Lordship of Jesus over our lives.

We sometimes like to get back to where we're in control. We're number one. It may be without Christ, it may be without prayer, it may be without God, but we want to be in this place of unbelief and we want to cope with that rather than the freedom and the honesty sometimes the battle of the Christian life because we lose sight of the blessings.

[8 : 05] We focus on the battles but we lose sight of the blessings of being involved in the Christian life and very quickly the Israelites here have lost sight of what freedoms they've been given and what freedoms they can look forward to and they are looking back to the slavery of Egypt.

We see two major struggles here. One is an internal struggle, an internal struggle of trust. They don't trust the living God and we also see they have an external struggle with the enemies, the Amalekites who come to fight them and we're going to look at these two struggles briefly here and in our own lives.

Here's this internal struggle, they have come through the Red Sea and they're heading towards the Promised Land and it seems already that God isn't providing for them.

They've seen a great deliverance and yet they're tempted to not trust God, not believe God and not rely on God and they want to rely on their own instincts and their own wisdom.

Their grumbles are all related to their appetites. We find in chapter 15 that they're wanting water, manna and quail and the water is bitter but God provides by making that water sweet and then they're moaning and grumbling that they don't have food to eat and so God brings them manna and quail that they are to have every day in the desert, God's provision.

[9 : 45] We now hear that it refed them again and they're quarrelling with the gods and with Moses as God's representatives and they say they have nothing to drink, they don't trust that God will provide, even though they've seen God's provision in so many different ways and they're craving the dubious security of Egypt once again where they were in control.

They have selective memories and that's so often the same way for us but God provides for them, doesn't he?

It's a tremendous passage where God provides for them. Moses chides them for testing God and for not trusting and go, why do you put the Lord your God to the test?

He will provide water as he's done before, he'll provide food as he's done before and there's this amazing miracle where he provides for them, he loves them, he's brought them out of slavery, he's their king, he's going to take them to the promised land and they are to trust him.

That is our daily struggle and that's our daily battle. Our daily battle is ourselves to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ for all our needs.

[11 : 07] The world is driven, the world in which we live is driven by the creation of needs and by the need to have more things and do more things that will satisfy us.

We're constantly given cravings and we think often that if we're to be happy, we have many needs that need to be satisfied, whether it be a new job or more pay or a bigger house or a better sex life or a new relationship or more entertainment, whatever it is we have great, a lot of needs that we work up in our lives apart from God's provision for us and there's two important principles that we recognize here and that we recognize throughout God's word.

One is that for all of us our greatest need is the Lord Jesus Christ himself. That's our greatest need. That's your greatest need in mind as we leave the building tonight and as we go into our workplace tomorrow or as we wake up tomorrow.

Our greatest need is a relationship, an ongoing relationship with Jesus Christ. Not a historical one, not one that might have been, not one that we had a number of years ago but an ongoing developing, maturing relationship with Jesus Christ.

That's our greatest need as people. That is where we will find the freedom that we're craving in some of the desires we have away from Christ.

[12 : 42] The greatest freedom we require is the not absolute freedom but true freedom in Him. We are made to be in that relationship with Him, to converse with Him, to trust Him, to allow Him, Lordship over our lives, to follow His ways because therein is true freedom and our greatest need is Jesus Christ.

He has already given us His best. The Israelites had the miracles of crossing the Red Sea and the provision of manna and the provision of water all pointing forward to a greater provision in Christ but they still hadn't entered the promised land but we have Christ's finished work.

We have Christ's commitment to us and Christ saying, it is done, I have done this great work for you and I can give you release from slavery and from sin and from grave and from pride and from bitterness and from self-righteousness and all of these things and our greatest need this evening is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself and the fulfillment that a relationship with Him brings.

I'm not saying that's all that life is about but that's our greatest need. And the second point with regard to that is Christ Himself knows what we need.

In Matthew chapter 6 and in verse 30 to 32 we have these words that Jesus says Himself, He says, if that is how God closed the grass of the field which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will He not much more clothe you of little faith?

[14 : 28] So do not worry saying what shall we eat or what shall we drink or what shall we wear for the pagans run after these things but your heavenly Father knows that you need them. He knows that we need these things, these everyday things but seek first His kingdom and His righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well.

He's not saying we don't have earthly needs, we don't have requirements but He's put them into the right perspective. God knows that we need them. He knows these practical physical things and when we put Him first He will provide what we need.

It might not always be what we want but He provides what we need. These people here needed sustenance, sweet man and quail and water that they could drink, good water that they could drink.

That was their basic fundamental human needs and He was willing to provide that. You know it wasn't that their needs were wrong. God provided for them these needs, it was just the emphasis was wrong and so often that's the same with us.

It's not that the needs we have are wrong, it's just that we don't trust Him, that we push Him aside, that we leave Him out of the picture in order to pursue these things our own way and they become more important than our relationship with Him.

[15 : 52] We have appetites and these appetites are to be channeled by Him. He is to be a Lord of these appetites and in Him we find real fulfillment.

So we recognize and know that in Christ and in following Christ and in recognizing Christ and in trusting Christ there is joy and fulfillment.

Paul learned that lesson and he knew that lesson whether he was in plenty or whether he was in need, he had learned contentment by trusting in Christ.

So the reality of the application for this is as we go from here in our day to day living, do we trust in Christ?

When things begin to go wrong as they seem to go wrong here for the Israelites, do we immediately blame God? Do we immediately point a finger at God?

[16 : 47] Do we say, oh God doesn't love me anymore? Or why is this happening? Or do we wait on Him? And the interesting thing is in this passage when they complained about lack of water even God did provide for them and yet a few days later they arrived in a place where there was water and where there was plenty of provision for them.

So there's this spiritual internal struggle that they have that they don't trust God. They would rather go back to slavery.

Is that a spiritual reality for you and for me that often we don't trust God? We stop trusting Him. We stop depending, relying, praying, when was the last time we opened the Word and looked for His guidance and looked for His direction?

When was it we last prayed over issues? Lack of trust is reflected in a lack of communication and in that desire simply to go our own way.

So there was this internal struggle. But also of course there was then after that an ongoing way, an external struggle. They had a lot of physical enemies.

[18 : 08] No sooner had the Egyptians been defeated that they faced the Amalekites who here also wanted to destroy them. And so they faced a battle and it wasn't only an internal battle of a lack of trust that God would provide but they thought they were then going to be annihilated by these Amalekites that were much bigger and much stronger than them.

Now previously they had seen God miraculously fighting on their behalf. But the temptation for them was to give up because it was so difficult for them.

No sooner they left Egypt then they've got more enemies to face in the Amalekites. What were they to do? These Amalekites were mean, they were nasty, they were vicious and brutal army and what they tended to do first would they would pick off the stragglers, the weak ones, the ones that weren't able to keep up women and children and they would annihilate them and then they would come round and destroy these traveling people.

What did God do here with this opposition, this spiritual or this physical opposition from outside? Well, he told them to fight and he told them to pray.

That was the two things that they were to do. The people were to go with Joshua and fight the Amalekites and Moses was to pray.

[19 : 41] That was what they were given to do, they had to stand against evil. They weren't to run away, they weren't to give up.

It did seem that the odds were stacked against them but they were to stand against evil. It was kill or be killed in this physical but also spiritual battle that was going on and they were to fight.

But at the same time, Moses was to hold his hands up and that is clearly an indication that as their leader he was imploring God to fight on their behalf and it was very physical, it was very evident for them that this is what Moses was doing.

They would be able to see what he was doing as it was on the top of the hill and there was this really physical way in which they learned that God was with them because when Moses put his hands down, he was tired, they would start getting beat and then when his hands were raised again by his friends who helped him and raised his hands up, they started winning.

A very tangible, a very physical and visual display to the people that they had to fight but they were fighting with the Lord on their side through prayer, through intercession and he would clearly and miraculously win the battle for them because he had promised that's what he would do.

[21 : 13] He would defeat the enemies of his people and they would enter the promised land. Now we have that joint responsibility to pray and to fight in our Christian lives and we know it's very different, it's not the same physical battles we face, we're not asked to go on Crusades anymore, it's a spiritual battle that we have.

It's a spiritual fight that we're engaged in and we are to do all that we can. It's an energetic life, the Christian life, we're to engage all our energies in the Christian fight as if it's all up to us to be Christian but then we're to pray fervently in the belief that it's all up to God if you see what we're getting at there.

There's that joint responsibility, there's a verse in Colossians I think that helps explain that a little bit in our lives. Colossians 1 verse 29 where Paul says to this end and he's talking about laboring for the church, I labor, struggle, I labor he says, I work.

To this end I labor struggling he says with all my energy, no all his energy which so powerfully works in me.

So we have that kind of paradox that we labor but it's with his energy that works in us and they were to fight but it was with God's strength that they would win through dependence and prayer on him, clearly miraculous and that is what we have to do in our lives.

[23 : 04] We can't sit back with our understanding of grace and the fact that God is giving us salvation and we haven't earned anything to just sit back and say well it's all up to God and he'll open up the way and it'll be full of miracle and it'll be great and easy because it's a battle and we are to cooperate with him, we are to fight a spiritual fight and when Ephesians speaks about that fight that we're to be in, spiritually engaged in, alert, aware of spiritual enemies, those who want to pull us down, the evil one who wants to make us doubt and give up the Christian faith and walk away and just live for our money or live for our job or live for our relationship or whatever it might be and we are to recognise that we have that battle in which we are engaged.

We also are to recognise that we must be prayerful, absolutely crucial that we are prayerful in our lives and this very physical illustration of Moses holding up his hands and when his hands dropped that he, the battle was getting beat and his hands were held up by his friends supporting him one on either side and there's a great picture there of the importance of prayer in our, you can't be a Christian if you are not praying, I put it as bluntly as you can, you can't grow as a Christian if you are not praying and it's not about church here, it's not about gathering necessarily although a hugely significant is these gathering together prayer because of what we're saying here with Moses being held up by his friends and prayers corporate as well, we hold each other up in prayer, we need it, we can't cope on our own, we need prayer but the huge significance of living our Christian lives in his energy, you know I work, that's his energy that works so powerfully in me and that energy comes, that Holy Spirit power comes through prayer, comes through the Lord, today I wake up and

I need you, I need you to live in me and through me through this Christian life, naturally I'm weak, I'm cowardly, I'm struggling, I'm full of doubt, I need you and we need that dependence in prayer as well as the tremendous energy of God to actually work and maybe that we are people who know victory because God has promised that victory and in prayer that we will be able to say the Lord is my banner and in St. Columbus here we can say the Lord is my, the Lord is our banner because what we're doing here is worthless unless it's bathed in prayer, how you live your Christian life and my life mine is worthless if it is not bathed in prayer and if it's not dependent upon this amazing God who will work powerfully in us if we will allow him and it's not saying that we will not face enemies, we will absolutely undoubtedly face spiritual enemies and face the enemies of sin in our own lives, we will recognise and see that, that will be the way. I watched a film last night with Ross which was one of the Harry Potter films which are dire, really, the acting is just outstandingly poor but there is one line that towards the end that was opposite I think which is, I don't know who said it, many said there are hard times ahead and you can either do what is right or you can do what is easy and I think that's a significant spiritual truth in our lives, the battles that we face as Christians because we've engaged the wrath and the ire of the evil one and because we remain sinners, undoubtedly saved by grace and by his power we can do all things but we need to choose if we're going to do what's right or we're going to do what's easy and the challenge is always to do what's easy isn't it? So the challenge is to do what's right but the temptation is always to do what's easy so let us be people who do what's right because when we do what's right we are guaranteed his power and his strength and his forgiveness and his grace and his victory so that we can see as people the Lord is our banner and may you see the people around you as needing your prayer support, may you see it in your families, may you see it with your best friends, may you see it with city groups and in this congregation we can't survive on our own, we need to be doing this what Moses and what Erin and her did for Moses and we need to be working and we need to take this seriously we're not mucking around with these things this is God's way and this is God's truth and we pray that by God's grace we might serve and follow him his way and no provision and no miraculous victory, this power heads in prayer. Lord God we thank you that this story reminds us even though it's bedded deep in the Old Testament and in a physical deliverance and in a physical provision does speak to us very clearly of your dealings with your people and that very often we are tempted not to trust you because the situation we find ourselves in doesn't seem to be very conducive to God's favour and blessing and yet Lord God you promise as we follow you

and trust you that you will provide and give us deeper trust, deeper faith, deeper courage when we leave here in our workplaces with our friends and the decisions we need to make to trust in obedience to do what you want us to do even though it might seem impossibly difficult because you will provide because you love us, seek first your kingdom is what you say and all these things will be added to you, may we put you first, may that priority be absolutely crucial in our lives and may we also recognise the spiritual battle we are in, may we be energetic spiritually in knowing you, learning about you and understanding you and seeking your favour in prayer and in action, living out grace and doing so with a dependence upon the Holy Spirit and a dependence on prayer. Lord save us whatever else we are, save us from being prayerless, help us to be children who cry to their heavenly Father and help us to be dependent that way, give us that make the time Lord, help us to make the time for this crucial reality and to see that nothing matters more than lifting our hands in prayer and may we encourage one another when we are weary, poor Moses was weary as he lifted his hands in the battle and his friends helped him, Lord many of us are weary in our Christian lives and may we not have to struggle on alone but may we be supported by one another in prayer, by an honest and open and vulnerable dependence on each other and by the amazing miracle of God's provision so that we can say the Lord is our banner, may that be our hope this evening. In Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.