

018e

Ex 17:1-7

JESUS CHRIST, ROCK BROKEN FOR US

(EE5)

It is soon after the departure of the covenant people from Egypt, before their arrival at Sinai. They are grumbling against the Lord — and it isn't the first time.

In ch.15 the people reach Marah, where the Lord put them to the test. The water is too bitter to drink. They grumble, and the Lord shows Moses a piece of wood which he has to throw into the water. He does this, and the water turns sweet.

In ch.16 the Israelites long for the meat they had in Egypt and grumble against Moses again — but also against the Lord (v.3, 7, 8). The Lord now begins to send them the manna and quail that would sustain them throughout the next decades. It was a sign that God had freed them from Egyptian oppression, that He was the Almighty, and that He had noticed their revolt against Him.

The events at Rephidim

The rebellion here at Rephidim (later called *Massah* and *Meribah*), so soon after their previous two insurrections, is shocking. Would not He who had split the sea in two, who provided manna and quail, also supply the people with water? After all, it is He who had led them to Rephidim.

The people are furious with Moses. They are threatening to stone him (v.4). But he protests vehemently: their quarrel is with the Lord, not with him (v.2b).

He is right. In fact, the people are sinning in two ways against God.

+ Firstly, the Israelites are provoking the Lord. When they want Moses to give them water their tone is challenging: "*Is the Lord among us or not?*" (7). In other words, if He is in our midst — and that is an open question — you should just have to snap your fingers and we would have water!

+ Secondly, the term "*quarrel*" (v.2) indicates in Hebrew *to lodge a charge*. It is the stem for the name *Meribah* (v.7), and *Micah* (6:1-8) uses it for the Lord's court case against Israel.

The people are accusing Moses. But he is only the Lord's representative.

In reality, they are placing God in the dock!

God is just. The people are accusing Him. *Very well then, the case will be heard!*
But who will sit at the bench? Moses will be the judge, and the elders the jury! (v.5).
Moses must take his staff with him (v.5). It is a symbol of authority and the administration of justice. It is the staff with which the waters of the Nile were turned to blood, which cleaved the sea, and controlled the fight against the Amalekites (v.9).

The following is certainly one of the most astonishing incidents related in the Bible. The Lord stands upon a rock. Moses has to strike the rock, after which water will gush from it (v.6).

The NASB; Amplified; AV; NKJV translates the preposition more accurately than the NIV: The Lord stood *upon* the rock.

People stand in front of God, never the other way around! And yet, here the unthinkable is taking place: the Lord stands in front of the people — to assume the place of a wrongdoer and be judged.

Is God guilty then? Absolutely not! It is the Israelites who are guilty. What is happening here? God is a *just* God. His law must be fulfilled. But as God of the covenant with their forefather, He also wishes to save His people.

There is only one solution — He will have to take the condemnation upon Himself in their stead!

"Is the Lord among us?", the people asked gloatingly. O yes, He is indeed! But in a very different way to that which they expected. He is not only standing amongst them — He is standing in their place. *He carries their "guilt"!*

How did Moses manage to perform what the Lord commanded him to do? What passes through his thoughts as he lifts the staff above his head, and then brings it down with all his strength?

If ever someone had faith, this would be it. Here is unparalleled obedience!

As Moses's staff hits the rock, it bursts open and a stream of life-giving water gushes out. It was assuredly not a half-hearted little trickle. After all, the Israelites were an immeasurable throng. And their livestock had to drink as well.

Our text does not describe the stream, but Ps 105 — which extols God's great works of deliverance — sketches the picture: *"He opened the rock, and water gushed out; it flowed like a river in the desert"* (v.41).

The significance of this event

It stands to reason that one should not read Christ into every line of the Old Testament. But many of us are so intimidated by contemporary sceptical theology that we are too timid to see Christ at all in the Old Testament. This attitude completely disregards undeniable New Testament testimony, however. If you want to remove Christ from the Old Testament, you must first dispose of the New Testament entirely.

For instance, consider the following: *"And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself"* (Luke 24:27).

Also: *"Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture (Is 53) and told him the good news about Jesus"* (Acts 8:35).

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Also compare John 5:39 and 1Pet 1:10-12.

Concerning this passage of Scripture, we have a clear as glass mandate from the New Testament to read Christ into it: *"They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ"* (1Cor 10:4).

In Ex 17 God promises the coming atonement of His Son! Verse 6 anticipates the entire gospel!

Listen to 2Cor 5:21: *"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us"* He was the innocent bearer of our punishment!

Numbers 20:1-13

Forty years later Moses finds himself in a similar confrontation with the people. Again there is no water, and again a rock and a staff are involved. Yet some details of the command he receives from God contrasts sharply with that of the previous one.

As opposed to the previous occasion when he had to hit the rock, he now has to speak to it. And now he has to take Aaron with him, and use, not his own, but Aaron's staff (8, 9; 17:10; NAV; NIV). Whereas the first occasion was *legal* in nature, this occasion has a *priestly* character.

But, instead of speaking to the rock, Moses hits it — twice — in his anger at the Israelites (11). Still, enough water comes out to satisfy the people and their livestock. How gracious God is!

However, Moses's violation is no small matter. *He (and his brother) will never enter Canaan!*

If we are honest with ourselves, it feels as if Moses's punishment is completely out of proportion to his disobedience. He had served the Lord faithfully for forty years — as few had done before him. For decades he had lived for one purpose only — to lead the Lord's chosen people into the Promised Land. And now, on the eve of the fulfilment of his dream, he is thwarted!

Why this severe punishment? Was it simply because he was disobedient in front of the entire Israelite host? No! No! Much more is involved: *The prophecy of Christ that was supposed to be enacted on this occasion in front of the chosen people, was violated in a terrible way!*

Christ was crucified once only — once and for all (Rom 6:9-10; Heb 9:26, 28). It was a perfect work, and was to be the entire and sufficient source and basis of all blessings for those who would be united to Him through faith. And all that is necessary to get a part in this, is to speak to the Lord — to ask it in faith, on the basis of Christ's once-and-for-all completed and finished work!

+ Two different Hebrew words for "rock" are used: *tsur* (Ex 17) and *sela* (Num 20). Although they are often interchangeable, one wonders whether it is significant that *tsur* refers more to a solid rock, whereas *sela* is often used for a cleft rock. 1

1 Harris, Archer & Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Vol 2, p. 627.
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+ In this tragic event we see firstly how non-negotiable and important the gospel is to God.

Secondly, we see how it revolts Him when someone tries to add something to the perfect work of His Son.

We see thirdly how high He values Old Testament foreshadowings of the gospel.

In spite of the people's constant grumbling, and in spite of Moses's disobedience, water still gushes from the rock. How merciful is the Lord! (2Tm 2:13).

Conclusion

Some years ago a well-known journalist publicly rejected the gospel, apparently because it doesn't make sense. She cannot see why God, if He is indeed sovereign and almighty, cannot simply forgive our sins without further ado. Why was it necessary to let His Son die such a grotesque death? A father (to quote her) doesn't treat his children like that!

It is tragic ignorance that speaks thus!

Never will God act in a way that is in conflict with any of His attributes. Whatever He does, is in accordance with all His character traits. Therefore, since He is also a holy and just God, His redemption cannot and will not take the shape of a simple free pardon. He will never just sweep someone's debt of sin furtively under the carpet. Sin has to be punished, all sin, every sin.

This is why the Son was sent — to carry the sinner's punishment for him or her.

That is why He had to be wholly man, for only a man could serve as substitute for men and women.

That is why He had to be wholly God, because only God can carry the sins of millions and so pay their debt.

Either Christ suffers your punishment, or you do so yourself.

And faith — embracing Christ — is the determining factor.

Lastly and very important, the substituting mediatorship of our Lord Jesus Christ was not just a last resort, a plan B. No, He was "*handed over by God's set purpose and foreknowledge and put ... to death by nailing him to the cross*" (Act 2:23).

And this gospel was prophesied to Israel for centuries before Calvary. In fact, long before that Abraham already saw the coming Saviour (Joh 8:56). And even long before him, Adam and Eve were told that the offspring of the woman would crush the head of the serpent (Gen 3:15).

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