

Our text for today is the last sections of the larger section “The Companionate God” or as we perhaps better understand it, the God who is with Israel. We see God’s provision, protection and direction. It shows God’s providences in his care for his people. It addresses the leadership challenges that Moses faced both from within the community and from outside. In the previous chapter we have seen God provide water, food, manna and quails for them as they traveled through the wilderness. He did this in spite of their grumblings against Moses and Himself. They blamed Moses, but ultimately as Moses and Aaron said, they were really grumbling against the Lord. In the very next section, we once again see them grumbling for the lack of water.

Let’s read the text together.

All the congregation of Israel moved on from the wilderness of Sin by stages, according to the commandment of the Lord, and camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, “Give us water to drink.” And Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?” But the people thirsted there for water, and the people grumbled against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?” So Moses cried to the Lord, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.” And the Lord said to Moses, “Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel, and

take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink.” And Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. And he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the quarreling of the people of Israel, and because they tested the Lord by saying, “Is the Lord among us or not?”

The whole assembly moved from the Wilderness of Sin to Rephidim, near Mt. Sinai and the rock of Horeb, and near to where Moses had seen the bush burning. There was no water and the lack of water was a threat to their survival. They still had not learned that God was with them and would provide for them. So they demanded that Moses provide water. They were clearly angry and blamed Moses for bringing them up out of Egypt. They assigned evil motives to Moses when they said he had brought them out of slavery to kill them with thirst. We might complain against the leaders in our lives—our husbands, bosses, pastors, or government leaders—expecting them to do what only God can do. What is the problem with their and our thinking? Motyer points out that the people expected the way to the promised land to be easy. Once they left slavery, they thought that they had left hardship behind. They expected a land flowing with milk and honey; they did not expect opposition. But God was giving them an opportunity to grow in their understanding of his love and power. Perhaps we fall into this idea that God should smooth out all the bumps in our way or perhaps some of us have been led to believe that when we begin to follow the Lord, our life will be free of hardship or struggle. But that is not the case. The Bible tells us

that we are in a battle with sin, both internally and externally. In Ephesians 6:11, Paul encourages us to put on the whole armor of God so we can stand against the schemes of the devil. In I Peter 4:12, Peter encourages us not to be surprised when the fiery trial comes upon us, as if something strange is happening. We will have struggles in this world and as James 1:3 points out, these trials produce steadfastness and build in us godly character.

As their anger increased, Moses cried out to the Lord “What should I do with this people?” He brought his complaint to the Lord for direction, rather than responding in anger to the people’s demands. He trusted that God would protect him and direct him in what to do. He poured out his complaint to God, by faith, trusting that God would do what was best. In Psalm 142:1-3 David writes, “With my voice I cry out to the Lord; with my voice I plead for mercy to the Lord. I pour out my complaint before him; I tell my trouble before him. When my spirit faints within me, you know my way!” It was later in their wanderings that Moses responded in disobedience to the Lord and anger against the people for their demands and lost the privilege of entering the promised land. He did not honor God before the people. I had to stop and ask myself how many times I responded to my children’s sin in a sinful, angry way, rather than display the forbearance of the Lord toward them. I dishonored the Lord many times in this way, and yet his patience and forgiveness toward me has been very great.

The Lord told Moses to take his staff along with some of the elders to the rock, to strike it, and that water would come out of it. He also

promised to stand before Moses on the rock—being with him in an extraordinary way. Moses did this and that is exactly what happened. God provided water for them in spite of their hard hearts. They had witnessed the plagues in Egypt, experienced the crossing of the Red Sea, and been provided with manna, all of these God's miraculous works, and yet their hearts were hard toward him. The place names Massah and Meribah meant testing and quarreling as a reminder of what had taken place there. The people failed to understand the character of their God, his provision and protection. They questioned whether he was with them. Surely if he were with them, they wouldn't be going through this lack of water! Like us many times, they wanted God to do things their way. Psalm 95:7-9 and Hebrews 3:7-4:13 are reminders and warnings to us not to test God or doubt his goodness, not to harden our hearts against his good plan for us. When we face times of testing through economic struggles, illness, or loneliness do we blame God or doubt his care for us? Do we harden our hearts against Him or in faith pour out our complaint and trust him to do what is best? In times of struggle, I have found journaling to be helpful, as I pour out my heart to the one who hears and who cares.

Finally, the rock that Moses struck points us to Jesus. The rock is a common Old Testament name for God. I Corinthians 10:4-5 identifies Jesus as the rock from which the Israelites drank. “And all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.” As Tony Merida points out, Moses struck the rock instead of striking the people—Jesus was struck for our salvation as he hung on the cross. As he

poured out his life for us, water was provided that we might drink deeply of the eternal life that is offered to us.

In the next section of our text, Moses and Israel face challenges from outside the community. Let's read it together beginning in verse 9. Then Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim. So Moses said to Joshua, "Choose for us men, and go out and fight with Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand." So Joshua did as Moses told him and fought with Amalek, while Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed, and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed. But Moses' hands grew weary, so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it, while Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side. So his hands were steady until the going down of the sun. And Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the sword. Then the Lord said to Moses, "Write this as a memorial in a book and recite it in the ears of Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven." And Moses built an altar and called the name of it, The Lord Is My Banner, saying, "A hand upon the throne of the Lord! The Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation."

While at Rephidim Israel's first battle with the people of the land takes place. The people of Amalek attack Israel. Who were the people of Amalek and why did God vow to blot out their memory from the earth (vs. 14)? They were people who lived in the northern Sinai peninsula. They were descended from Esau, Jacob's brother.

We don't know why they attacked Israel. Perhaps they just didn't want these people traveling near their land or perhaps they hoped for valuable plunder. But in any case, the Bible says that they did not fear God. They also took advantage of the condition of the people when they were tired, especially those who were lagging behind. Deuteronomy 25:17-19 says this: "Remember what Amalek did to you on the way as you came out of Egypt, how he attacked you on the way when you were faint and weary, and cut off your tail, those who were lagging behind you, and he did not fear God." These people hated the people of God and sought to destroy them. They set themselves up against the Lord's purposes and so God determined to wipe them out. The Lord loved His people and he had a purpose for them that could not be thwarted. Moses was to write down God's decree against the Amalekites so it wouldn't be forgotten. The Amalekites continued to be a threat to Israel for many years. But the Chronicler records in I Chronicles 4:43 that more than 500 years later, during the reign of King Hezekiah, the tribe of Simeon eradicated the Amalekites.

In this section we come to the first mention of Joshua, Moses' aide, and the one who would ultimately lead the people into the promised land. In response to the Amalekite's attack, Moses, who does not still have the vigor of youth, appoints Joshua as the commander of the army of men that Joshua will choose. Notably Joshua doesn't argue, but follows Moses' instructions as from the Lord, even though none of the men have fighting experience. Joshua clearly shows that he trusts Moses' leadership. For his part, Moses promises to go to the top of the hill with Aaron and Hur and the staff of God. The staff

appears for the second time in this passage and represents the presence and power of God. This is also the first mention of Hur, who is Caleb's son. Moses' holding up his hands with the staff in them, as a determiner of who prevailed in battle, reinforced to all the people that he was the Lord's choice to lead Israel. He did this as an appeal to God to show his power. Although prayer is not specifically mentioned, this is clearly prayer and intercession. In the Old Testament, the lifting of hands was a customary expression of prayer or praise (Psalm 63:3-4), so that reinforces the idea that this was prayer. God is powerfully working through Moses to bring deliverance as he continues to hold up the staff with his hands, asking God to fight for them. Yet, as you can imagine or if you've ever tried to do this, holding up your hands for a long period of time is very tiring. And so, Moses grew tired and Aaron and Hur held up his hands so that Israel would prevail. It's often challenging to continue to pray over long periods of time when interceding for brothers and sisters who are struggling. Having others join us in this intercessory prayer is so very helpful. Moses here didn't pray one time and go on his way; the victory depended on his sustained prayer and the support of Aaron and Hur, recognizing that God gives the victory. In addition, I think it could be surmised that Moses was not eating during this time. Fasting and prayer are powerful weapons in the struggle. So, we see in this section that there was a need for fighting, as Joshua led the army, but also for prayer, as Moses held up his hands to acknowledge the people's need for God's help.

As Tony Merida says in his commentary, “We need courageous, Joshua like warriors who will take the gospel to hard places, fight injustice, and serve the needy,--but all of it must be done in a spirit of dependent prayer.” Another commentator said that it was Moses who won the battle because it was prayer that determined the outcome. This is such a reminder of our need to both support our leaders in prayer and in practical ways, as they lead us on mission. Prayer is the means that God uses to unleash his power. And of course, we ourselves need others to be praying for us and encouraging us as we face various trials and challenges on our journey, and as we battle our own sinful tendencies. We may grow weary in our task of intercession, but as Hebrews 7:25 points out, Jesus ever lives to make intercession for us. So, how are we engaged in the battle? Perhaps you are serving on respite night, in Sunday School, or supporting women going through crisis. The victory is won through prayer. Enlist others to uphold you as you engage in these battles. Now I’ll speak to those of us who are older. As we age, our energy levels and physical abilities may decline, but the time we have to serve may increase. Over the last few years, I have been increasingly challenged through others and the scripture, to spend more time interceding for those who are on the frontlines, fighting the battles God has assigned to them.

There are many scriptures that speak about the importance of prayer as we engage in the battles that God has called us to. I’ll just share a few. Ephesians 6 tells us that “we don’t wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the

spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” Therefore we need to take up the armor of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, making supplication for all the saints. We need to pray for one another as we face various challenges. Colossians 4:2 reminds us, “Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with Thanksgiving. At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word...that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.” We need to pray for those who preach the gospel, that it would be effective and result in many coming to know the Lord.

After the victory, Moses built an altar to worship the Lord and called it, The Lord is my Banner. A banner is a signal pole around which an army gathers and rallies. The Lord is truly the commander of the army and He has given the victory. So it is with Jesus. He is our leader. He has delivered us from the power of darkness by his death on the cross for us, and we are part of his redeemed people who follow him and engage in the Lord’s battles and in the extension of his kingdom rule. Isaiah 11:10 says, “On that day the root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples. The nations will seek Him and his resting place will be glorious.”

Finally chapter 18 recounts Jethro’s visit to Moses. This visit actually comes chronologically after verse 19:1, but thematically it fits here. Jethro is a priest of Midian. Midian was a descendant of Abraham and Keturah (his wife after Sarah’s death), so Moses and Jethro had a common ancestor. Jethro has heard that the Lord has brought the Israelites, under Moses’ leadership, out of Egypt and he comes to the wilderness at the base of Mt. Sinai where Israel is camped. He

brings with him Moses' wife Zipporah and their two sons, Gershom and Eliezer, who at some point Moses had sent home, perhaps due to safety concerns; we don't know. When Jethro arrived, Moses greeted him respectfully by bowing and kissing him. The relationship between them appears to be a good one, one of friendship, as evidenced by them taking time to "catch up" as we might do with a friend over a meal. Moses tells Jethro about the hard slavery in Egypt and how God delivered his people. Undoubtedly he told him of the plagues and the Passover, of the crossing through the Red Sea as God miraculously intervened, of the bitter water made sweet, the provision of manna and of water from the rock. He would have recounted the battle with the Amalekites. As Jethro listened, he believed what Moses said and this is what is recorded in verse 9 and following: "And Jethro rejoiced for all the good that the Lord had done to Israel, in that he had delivered them out of the hand of the Egyptians. Jethro said, 'Blessed be the Lord, who has delivered you out of the hand of Pharaoh and has delivered the people from under the hand of the Egyptians. Now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods, because in this affair they dealt arrogantly with the people.'"

As Jethro heard Moses' story, he was convinced that Yahweh was greater than all other gods and he not only believed, but rejoiced. This former priest of Midian, a worshipper of other gods, a Gentile, came to believe in Yahweh, the God of the Israelites as the true God. This is a beautiful encouragement to us that sharing our stories with others can encourage faith in the hearers. Jethro heard from Moses of the Lord's salvation, and also likely witnessed the change in

Moses himself, and he believed. Moses was once a timid, fearful servant, but now God has transformed him into a bold leader. Moses simply shared what he had witnessed-- God's saving work on behalf of his people. Likewise, our stories can be a powerful testimony to the work of God in our lives because of what Jesus has done for us in his life, death, and resurrection, and how he has brought us into new life. This is the first record that someone outside of the community of Israel, a Gentile, has believed, and this is just a preview of what God would do through Jesus one day. To evidence his faith in Yahweh, Jethro offered a burnt offering, which would have been consumed as an atonement for sin, explained later in Leviticus. He also brought sacrifices to be offered and eaten with Moses, Aaron and all the elders, signifying his acceptance into the community of faith. So, Jethro, a Gentile, is brought into the community of faith by the testimony of what God has done within the community. May we see many conversions to faith here at New Life for this reason.

In the remainder of the chapter, we see Moses in a challenge of his own making. Moses is overworking. He is occupied from morning until evening handling disputes and helping the people who have questions, ALONE. Jethro observes this and wisely realizes that Moses cannot continue to do this or he will burn out. Jethro says this:

“What you are doing is not good. You and the people with you will certainly wear yourselves out, for the thing is too heavy for you. You are not able to do it alone. Now obey my voice; I will give you advice,

and God be with you! You shall represent the people before God and bring their causes to God and you shall warn them about the statutes and the laws, and make them know the way in which they must walk, and what they must do. Moreover, look for able men from all the people, men who fear God, who are trustworthy and hate a bribe, and place such men over the people as chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. And let them judge the people at all times. Every great matter they shall bring to you, but any small matter they shall decide themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you.

God has given Jethro great wisdom here and Moses receives it with humility; he respects and values his advice as one would a godly mentor. God was gracious in giving this timely advice through Jethro, who clearly had administrative gifts that Moses did not. How much we all need the wisdom of brothers and sisters who are gifted in areas that we are not! Moses needs other godly men to help him and to bear the daily burden of leading. We, as human beings, are limited in our physical ability. No one can do it all. Jethro encouraged Moses to represent the people before God in prayer and to teach the law of God to the people. In a similar way in Acts, the apostles appointed deacons to help with distribution to the needy, so the apostles were free to teach and to pray. Our pastors need others with them to help shepherd the people of God—elders, deacons, deaconesses, home group leaders, youth group leaders, women’s caregivers, and WBS small group leaders. God has designed each of us to minister to others and to help bear each other’s burdens. Galatians 6:2 says “Bear one another’s burdens

and so fulfill the law of Christ. I am so grateful to share ministry with others in Sunday School, Women's Bible study, and ESL teaching. It is a great joy to join with others as we walk the journey God has given us in caring for his people.

These three events from the early months of Israel's exodus from Egypt show that God is with Israel. He is truly the companionate God. He provides for their daily needs, he fights their battles and he directs the governing of the people. And this is despite the people's grumbling and complaining. We too can experience this companionate God—not just as one who walks alongside us, but as one who actually indwells us through the Holy Spirit. May we daily live into this reality as we engage with a broken world.