

RUF Bible Study – The Book of Exodus
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Exodus 17 – Rock and Banner

At Concordia University in Austin there is a fountain in the back of the chapel. It is a rather large rock, perhaps about three feet tall, and water flows out of the top of it. Now this wouldn't be unusual if it were in a garden. Fountains like this are pretty standard. With a pump and some hose, you can make a fountain out of pretty much anything.

But in a church? Why put a fountain like this in the back of a church? The reason comes from this chapter in Exodus. If you search “rock” in the Bible, you'll find that God is called Israel's rock and fortress. He is the Rock of Israel, who is the rock but God?, he is our rock and savior – and so forth.

I recently watched Clint Eastwood's movie, “Flags of our Fathers.” The movie looks at Iwo Jima and the WWII taking of that island from the Japanese. It focuses on the famous flag raising picture, and how that stood as a symbol of American victory – and all that went along with it like raising billions of dollars. As the title of the movie says, the flag was the central character.

What does it mean that God is our rock? What does it mean that God is our banner?

Problems

In this chapter, we have two problems. One is internal and the other is external. The first problem is internal and it's that of thirst. We all have heard that you will die faster from thirst than you will from hunger. And dehydration is a painful death.

Here are the Hebrew people again in trouble. They've been at this place before, but this time it seems worse. There isn't bitter water. There's *no* water. There is a town in Oklahoma called Nowata. Useless Oklahoma trivia, but interesting nonetheless. There is another Oklahoma town called Lotawata.

That's where Israel is. Nowata. And, yet again, God has brought them there. They were moving “at the Lord's command.” He led them by a cloud in the day and by fire at night. He is the one to blame when they are “tormented by thirst.”

Amalek

Later on, we read of a more external problem. It seems that not everyone was happy about these new people in town. A nomadic tribe called the Amalekites started attacking the people, picking them off at the rear and sides, going for the slow, defenseless and weak. (*Deut. 25:17* “Remember what Amalek did to you on the way as you came out of Egypt, 18 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.”)

God's people are being attacked here. The land is not totally safe, and God has not cleared it from all trouble. He wants his people to fight for it, something that you'll see again and again if you keep reading through the Old Testament. This is the first instance of war, but certainly not the last.

God brought his people out of Egypt by himself, by his own mighty hand, but now he will use secondary means, calling his people to fight for their nation.

Let's talk about the external struggle first. We are in a battle. Paul tells us that it isn't against flesh and blood but against the rulers of the air. It is against Satan, against evil, against sin. Against our own flesh, which wars against our souls. Against the Old Man. Do you forget this? Do you forget that Christians have enemies?

One of the most disturbing movies for me came out in 1991, “Sleeping with the Enemy.” It starred Julia Roberts as an abused wife who tries to get away from her husband. How incredibly terrible it is to be intimate with the thing that hurts you. To be married to your captor. To be hurt by the one supposed to protect you. You feel trapped. You must escape.

We not only are attacked from the outside, but we far too often make alliances with the enemy of our souls. We make deals, asking for peace if “it” will just leave us alone for awhile. We forget the malice, wanting to believe the best.

That is the way the world is, lest we forget. We have an enemy and we have enemies. Jesus says it is better to give than to receive. His and our enemies say we should get as much as we can. Jesus says that we should love and forgive. His and our enemies say that we should hurt someone before we get hurt. Jesus says we are to think of others as more important than ourselves. His and our enemies say that you must look out for number one. Jesus says that the humble and meek will receive

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Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: By Doug Serven, © Doug Serven, 2007, website: www.ouruf.org. For this series, I used commentaries on Exodus from Cole, Ryken, Enns, Childs, Pink, Cassuto, Motyer and Currid, as well *A House for My Name* by Leithart, *From Paradise to the Promised Land* by Alexander, and *The Gospel According to Moses* by A Dickson. I listened to sermons from Tim Keller and Les Newsom. The reader should assume that none of the ideas expressed are original to me.

blessing. His and our enemies say that that person is weak and no good. Jesus says that God loves his children and therefore they have an inherent worth. His and our enemies say that people are only worthwhile if they are useful, intelligent or beautiful.

His and our enemies seek our harm. It may not be a popular hymn anymore, but Onward Christian Soldier is right and true. We are marching into war. We have a real foe.

The Israelites have one here in the Amalekites. We can relate to them.

Quarrels

But we must remember the internal struggles too. We have our own problems, for we are not yet glorified. We cannot blame Satan for all our troubles. We have enough on our own.

When the people were faced with no water, what did they do? They quarreled. They complained. This is worse than the “grumbling” we saw in chapter 16. This quarreling is a new level of hostility, and is actually the precursor of former charges against Moses. Moses feels this, as he hears their demands.

But he sets them straight, telling them that their real complaint is against God. God had told them to go out there. And now here are his people demanding God’s provision, not asking or waiting for it, but insisting on it.² They are telling God what he had to do. They are also denying God’s protection, assuming the worst, impugning God’s motives. And they are doubting God’s presence, wondering if God is really with them after all.

They have spiritual amnesia. They can’t remember God’s goodness to them.

Isn’t that true for us?³ We so easily forget God’s goodness to us. What God did 30 minutes ago can seem like 30 days ago, like 3 years ago? Doesn’t God ever come through?, we cry out.

It’s so easy for us to see this in the book of Exodus. You may be tempted like I am to think of the Hebrew people as kind of stupid. Look!, we say. Chapter 15! Chapter 16! Can’t you see what’s going on here?!

But it’s easy for us since we have a perspective that sees all of this at one time, in one sitting. They were in it. Down on the ground, so to speak. We are sitting in a tower, with an overlook of what is happening.

I’ve been married for 13 years as of last week. I have an awesome wife and four amazing kids and feel loved by them. Many of you know them. In fact, most of you don’t know what I was like apart from them.

But I remember. I remember crying out to God, wondering if I would ever find a wife. I remember agonizing over dates and spurned romances, and huge mistakes in word and deed. I can remember being on the brink with Julie even, asking God if he would ever make things clear.

This seems a little silly now since everything has worked out the way it has. I guess I have a different perspective now. But you can relate to my earlier thoughts, can’t you? Many of you are worried and anxious over finding “the right one.” You wonder if God cares about you. If you’ve been left to die of thirst out in the wilderness. Did he lead me here – in singleness, at OU, in this major, with these friends, not getting into the right grad school – to DIE?

And you get mad at me, I know, when I meet with you and tell you it will be okay. That God loves you and has a plan for you and that he is in charge and knows your needs and there is no plan B for you. You forget that I used to be in college too. Or you think I’ve forgotten. I have a different, older perspective to offer you. It will be okay. God will come through, I promise. But you still have to walk through it.

Look at your life with the perspective like this and it will help you. It will help you to calm down and trust in God. It will help you to remember that on the ground things look crazier, messier, more haphazard than from a higher perspective.

Your troubles are real. They are internal and external. What do you do in your trials?

Let me mention one other thing. This perspective in trials and troubles things works fairly well in these areas of majors, grad schools, careers, dating, finances, etc. But what about *real evil*? Big time bad stuff?⁴ Don’t we all feel the need for justice in those areas too? What is our perspective supposed to be about 9/11, about Katrina, about the concentration camps?

Right after World War II, a German Lutheran pastor, Gunter Rutenborn wrote a play called “The Sign of Jonah.” In the play, the people begin to hear about the atrocities committed by their own country and are understandably upset. We aren’t to blame, the people said. It was the army. The soldiers in the army pointed the finger at the leaders, saying they were just following orders. Up the ladder the blame went, until they got to the top. At the very top, these people turned the blame on God. After all, he had created a world in which this could happen, hadn’t he? It’s God’s fault! Let’s put him on trial. So that’s what they did. They put God in the dock, in the British idiom. He was on trial.

In a separate essay from this play CS Lewis writes: “The ancient man approached God as the accused person approaching his judge. For the modern man the roles are reversed. He is the judge: God is in the dock. He is quite a kindly

² From Ryken’s commentary

³ Thoughts from Keller’s sermon on this passage found at redeemer.com

⁴ This illustration comes from several sources (Keller and Ryken come to mind) but I don’t know who got what from whom. Perhaps it all comes from a sermon by Ed Clowney. Dr. Clowney sat in on my ordination exams.

judge: if God should have a reasonable defense for being the god who permits war, poverty and disease, he is ready to listen to it. The trial may even end in God's acquittal. But the important thing is that Man is on the Bench and God in the Dock."⁵

When you get down to the bottom of your complaints, you'll find the same thing. Deep down, God is to blame, isn't he? Are you bitter? Angry? Disappointed? How do you think God could have done better? Do you allow yourself that sort of honesty, or do you take it out on others or yourself?

What do you do, where do you go in trouble?

Solutions

Let's look at God's solutions to these troubles and questions of our lives and souls.

Banner

Let's first see the solution at the end of the chapter. God's people fight the evil around them. This is good stuff, it is warfare, battling, armies and bloodshed. This makes sense to us. You fight for what you believe in. You defend your people, your wives and children, your nation.

I'm reading *1776*, a book by David McCullough about that year in the history of America and England. It is filled with exciting stories of how General Washington led his troops to victory despite incredible odds, terrible conditions, and little experience. With some good luck (some might say Providential), the United States of America broke away from England. These people fought for an idea of democracy. They fought against what they considered tyranny. They died for their country, lifting up a new flag with stars and stripes to rally around. They fought for the Star Spangled Banner. It is an inspiration.

It is here we first read of Israel's fighting for their nation, their people, their God. It is here we first read of Joshua, who will become a central figure in the upcoming narrative. It is here we see Moses as the leader of his people.

But what is he doing? We don't exactly know. He was holding up his hands, lifting the rod, and when he did that, his people continued winning. Dropping his hands and the rod changed the momentum.

Was he praying? That very well could be. Was he holding up the rod as a sign and symbol of judgment and power? Perhaps. People have speculated on this for centuries. Regardless, we know that Moses was too old to fight, so he was doing what he could. And that he needed help. Aaron and Hur held up his hands for him. We can't do it alone. We need a community, we need help in our struggles. The people, the soldiers, needed a leader to lead them. And the leader needed help too. Are you going it alone? Do you have help? In the next chapter we read how Moses needed even more help than he realized. We see the way the church was to be organized, with representatives who were capable, honest men who feared God and refused bribes (18:21). Who represents you in your fight against evil? Do you have a leader?

The people win the battle. And Moses erects a thanksgiving altar. He names it Yahweh Nissi, The Lord Is My Banner. This is one of the first times we learn of another name for God. We have been getting to know God (Elohim), and in chapter 3, this God told us his name is Yahweh, I Am Who I Am. Now he is given another part to his title, that of a banner.

A banner is a rallying flag. It is something that people can look to and see for hope, encouragement and orders. In the ancient world, flags and banners were used to signal troop movements, coordinate charges or retreats and to show that something had been accomplished. Sticking your banner on the hill, just like today, is a sign that you have conquered it.

Yahweh is our banner. He has conquered. He is the king of the hill. In the Westminster Shorter Catechism we are asked: How doth Christ execute the office of a king? The answer is: Christ executes the office of a king, in subduing us to himself, in ruling and defending us, and in restraining and conquering all his and our enemies.

We see that here.

Is Yahweh your banner? We used to sing a song called, *His Banner Over Me is Love*. That is true, but only if we remember that love involves fighting for your people. Love led the Americans to fight the British. Love isn't only cards, candy and hearts for Valentine's Day. It is truth, justice and even, yes, even warfare.

Rock

Returning to the first part of the chapter, we not only see God as our provision against our external enemies as a banner, but also for our internal enemies as a rock.

Remember that this word quarrel is litigious language. Moses again being charged of attempted homicide, and they are coming after him. "They are ready to stone me!" he cries out to God. He's not being overly dramatic. The lynch mob is coming after him. They may be truly angry with God, but they need a scapegoat, and it's going to be Moses. He's a little easier to kill after all.

There is real tension here. And what we're saying is that God is on trial. He's in the dock right here in this passage. God calls the people together and collects the elders. This is to be the jury. Now the people are on notice. What is going to happen?

⁵ CS Lewis, *God in the Dock*

Moses, as per God's instruction, takes the rod, the staff. This would make the people shiver. The rod is the rod and staff of judgment. This is the rod that turned the Nile to blood. This rod has gone to a snake and back. The people know this, and they know that this is the symbol of God's judgment for them too. Rods have this meaning.

The Romans symbol of power and jurisdiction was called the fasces, which was an ax bound by rods. When judgment was to be meted out, a rod would be extracted to the offender could be beaten. We still use this in our country. Fasces can be found at the rostrum of the House of Representatives and on both sides of the seat on Lincoln's Memorial. France still uses this on its passports and coat of arms today.

The people must be worried. There is a trial, but Moses isn't going to be tried. He is holding the rod of judgment, so it can't be him in the dock. The people have to think there is only one other choice – they will be found guilty.

And they should, shouldn't they? They have no right to complain against God. God should punish them. Do you see this? Do you see yourself here in their place? Have you complained to God? Have you so easily forgotten his goodness to you? Do you blame him for your troubles, grumbling in your heart against his leadership, kingship and redemption plan for you?

But what we see is astounding. In 17:6, we read: *"I will stand before you on the rock of Mount Sinai. Strike the rock and water will come gushing out. Then the people will be able to drink. So Moses struck the rock as he was told, and water gushed out as the elders looked on."*

Okay. This only makes sense if you understand it as a trial. And you see the rod of justice. And you see that God is on the rock. And the rod of justice is therefore striking – God. He is stricken, smitten and afflicted. He takes the judgment due the people. He takes the penalty due them onto himself, and not only that, then provides for their needs. They are thirsty. He provides for their need. They drink water from the rock. The most unlikely of places – the top of a rock. No one would think to look there for water, would they? And yet, that is where they get it. What does this mean?

Let's go back to our play, The Sign of Jonah. In the play, when God is on trial and no one wants to take responsibility of the evil, they find God guilty and sentence him. They decide God must "become a human being, a wanderer on earth, deprived of his rights, homeless, hungry, thirsty. He himself shall die. And lose a son, and suffer the agonies of fatherhood. And when at last he dies, he shall be disgraced and ridiculed."⁶

God has served that sentence. He isn't just the judge. He is the judge who was judged. He took the penalty for his people. This is a text about Jesus Christ. How do I know this?

First, read Is. 11:10 – *the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be glorious.* Who is the Root of Jesse? Jesus Christ is. We learn this in Matthew 1 and Luke 3. Jesus is our banner. He is our king. He is the one who rules over and defends us from his and our enemies. It is to him that we owe honor and allegiance, to whom we look for our orders and movements, who is our standard bearer leading us to victory.

And in something even more amazing, Paul doesn't just make associations, he goes straight for it. We read in 1 Cor. 10:3: *All of them ate the same spiritual food, 4 and all of them drank the same spiritual water. For they drank from the spiritual rock that traveled with them, and that rock was Christ.*

And that rock was Christ. God struck his own son in judgment. He is the one stricken smitten and afflicted. He is the suffering savior.

We sing about this in Rock of Ages.

Rock of Ages, cleft for me, Let me hide myself in Thee; Let the water and the blood, From Thy wounded side which flowed, Be of sin the double cure; Save from wrath and make me pure.

Not the labor of my hands Can fulfill Thy law's demands; Could my zeal no respite know, Could my tears forever flow, All for sin could not atone; Thou must save, and Thou alone.

When Jesus was struck, blood and water flowed from his side. Water from the rock.

Jesus said that this would be true in two places.

In John 4 there is Jesus' extended conversation with who we call the woman at the well:

7 A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." 8 (For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.) 9 The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?" (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.) 10 Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." 11 The woman said to him, "Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? 12 Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock." 13 Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, 14 but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

In John 7, Jesus returns to this theme:

37 On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. 38 Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'"

⁶ From Ryken, whose footnote says: Edmund Clowney, Jr. "God on Trial", *Christianity Today*, February 24, 1978, pp. 16-17.

Friends, where are you today? Are you feeling attacked from enemies? I would not be surprised if you are. You need a banner. The Banner is Christ.

Are you dealing with internal troubles, with doubts, with an unsatisfied heart? Are you thirsty for something? Are you trying to satiate your thirst with things other than Christ? With grades, looks, a rock hard body, a boyfriend, with sex, with popularity, with achievements, with a portfolio and a resume? You know that drinking liquids will not work. Drinks with caffeine will never hydrate you. If you drink salt water, you will die. You need living water. True water.

Do you hear God's voice tonight? In your troubles, he is calling you. He has led you here to hear his voice, to see his rod of judgment, to witness how HE has placed himself in the dock to be judged for you in your stead.

Don't you see that your questions have been answered?! Whatever your charge, he has answered it, even though he didn't have to. Your charges are often blasphemous, considering your lack of wisdom, experience, holiness or goodness. And yet, he has answered them. He has sat in the dock. He has taken the penalty on himself. That is his grace for you.

What we read in Psalm 95:7-9 is no less true for us today than it was for Israel then: *Today, if you hear his voice, 8 do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, 9 when your fathers put me to the test and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.*

Do not harden your hearts. God has been at work. He is at a work. He is the Banner and your Rock, your leader and your grace.

*Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim,
Till all the world adore His sacred Name.*

*Led on their way by this triumphant sign,
The hosts of God in conquering ranks combine.*

*Each newborn servant of the Crucified
Bears on the brow the seal of Him Who died.*

*O Lord, once lifted on the glorious tree,
As Thou hast promised, draw the world to Thee.*

*So shall our song of triumph ever be:
Praise to the Crucified for victory.*