

# **How God Deals with Rebels**

*One Study on God's Judgment  
and Provision in Exodus 17*

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Myrtlefield Sermons



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## How God Deals with Rebels

For our morning meditation, as we prepare our hearts to draw near to God, let us read together in the book of Exodus and chapter 17.

All the congregation of the people 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 quarrelled 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 quarrelling of the people of Israel, and because they tested the LORD by saying, 'Is the LORD among us or not?'

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.' (vv. 1-16)

And may God guide us in our meditations upon his holy word.

### Deliverance

The book of Exodus is an exceedingly ancient book, written over three thousand years ago. But although it is an exceedingly ancient book, it speaks still today directly to our hearts and not least for this reason, because of its sheer down-to-earth realism. The situation it is

describing, as we break into its records at this juncture, is that Israel had recently been delivered from their bondage and servility to the Pharaoh of Egypt. They had left Egypt in high spirits and jubilant mood. Their minds were full of the promises of God that he had not only delivered them from bondage, but he had for them an inheritance flowing with milk and honey, out there in the distant blue somewhere. An inheritance they had never seen, but which God assured them was truly theirs.

As they had come to the Red Sea, for a moment their courage had failed them, and they thought that the whole expedition would end in disastrous failure. But when at last they saw the wonder of the power of God and came through the Red Sea safely and stood upon its further banks, they looked back to see their former enemies dead in the waters, and they became so excited and elated that they sang to the Lord. And Moses led their choirs and Miriam responded, 'Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea' (15:21). They felt that they were almost at their inheritance. Another inch or two and their heads would poke into the substratum of heaven! They spoke freely in their song, not only that the Lord had brought them out, but they said, 'You will bring [us] in' (15:17). They felt as if they were almost there and sang fit to burst their lungs!

### **Discoveries**

But a few months down the road it was a very different picture, for it wasn't long before they made two shocking discoveries and the discoveries filled their hearts with bitter disappointment. The first discovery they made was that God wasn't what they thought he was. God was in fact very different from what they had imagined and they became sorely and bitterly disappointed with God. I don't know how it was, perhaps it was because of all that talk of the inheritance flowing with milk and honey, but they seemed to have imagined that their brief journey across the wilderness would be a kind of a coach tour, conducted in air-conditioned omnibuses! But it didn't turn out that way. They found the journey by which God took them was to be through a waste and howling wilderness.

At first their disappointment registered itself as they came to Moses, standing on the banks of the Red Sea, as they saw the Egyptian chariots coming on behind them. The thought of the taskmaster's whip and the recent feel of the lash upon their backs drove them in their misery to come to Moses and say, 'Moses, you fool, we always told you it was a ridiculous scheme. It was never likely to succeed. It was a wild, wild escapade. Fancy ever thinking that God could bring us out of the grip of the tyrant of Egypt! Would God that we'd died in Egypt where it was more comfortable, than to be massacred here by your stupid unrealism in trying to break the power of Pharaoh.' God in his mercy told them to stand still, while they experienced his magnificent power that would fight for them and deliver them from their enemies.

When they got over the Red Sea to the wilderness and began their journey in earnest, the lesson they had just learnt became dim. Their food became very ordinary and samey and minimal, and they came to Moses and said, 'We didn't sign up for this kind of thing. This is worse than what we had in Egypt. We remember the cucumbers and the onions and the garlic. I know we had to work rather hard, but at the end of the day, what glorious meals we would tuck into, flavoured and varied and luscious. Now we're reduced to this kind of prison fare

that you serve to us every day: it's like a living death, starving our appetites like this.' Moses had a job to contain them. And then came the terrible climax.

While they took their journey according to the commandment of the Lord, and attempted honestly to follow the guidance of the Lord in their journey, they came to a place where the water ran out completely. It was the last straw and it broke the proverbial camel's back. They came to Moses in a very ugly mood. 'This isn't good enough, Moses, we've had enough. You made us such glowing promises when we started, but this is absurd.' It wouldn't have been so bad if they had journeyed according to their own ideas and schemes and had neglected the leading of the Lord. But to follow the leading of the Lord and find that the Lord's own leading brought them into these dire straits where there was no water, brought them almost to despair. And they were in an ugly mood when they came to Moses, and they strove with Moses and were almost ready to stone him, as they said, 'Give us water, or else we pack the whole thing in.'

And there they made another discovery. Those same people who had so recently sung the praise of God on the banks of the Red Sea, still had within their hearts an incurable rebellion against God. 'Look here,' they said to Moses, 'you'll give us water or we shall ditch the whole idea of God. What we want is solid evidence that God is among us, for we've come nearly to the opinion that all your talk of God leading us, of God being with us, is so much hot air. Show us, Moses. Give us evidence. Is the Lord among us or not? Either you'll provide water or else we give up on the idea of God completely.' They discovered that they weren't the holy, worshipping, songful people that they thought they were. In their hearts there nestled rebellion against the living Lord.

### Testing times

Why did God do it? It seems to me, as we read these ancient records, we too could find an answering chord in our hearts. There was a hymn that we used to sing lustily in my youth and it ran like this:

He is not a disappointment!  
Jesus is far more to me  
Than in all my glowing daydreams  
I had fancied He could be<sup>1</sup>

Happy the child of God who has always been able to sing that sincerely and at full volume, but there are many believers who have not found it so in life. There have come periods in their lives when they have found God and his blessed Son grievously disappointing. They thought the road to heaven was going to be full of glory and adventure, only to find that, as they honestly followed the Lord's leading, it led them into distress and thirst and hunger and disappointment and heartbreak.

Why did God do it? Subsequently he told them. When they neared the promised land, he told them through Moses,

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<sup>1</sup> Anon., 'Not a disappointment.'

And you shall remember the whole way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart. (Deut 8:2)

God is out to make his people holy and there is only one way of making them, or us, holy. As it is fitting and circumstances allow, God will bring us to make the great discovery of what we are really like in the depths of our hearts. We will not wake up one of these mornings and say to ourselves, 'I feel different somehow this morning. I wonder what's happened to me. Oh, I think I know what it is. I've become holy overnight.' We don't become holy overnight. We don't suddenly get a surge of curious feeling and, lo and behold, we have become holy. We become holy by that difficult, tiresome, painful process of being made, from time to time, to face ourselves, to face our sin, to face our basic rebellion. And, facing it, we learn what an ugly thing it is and we learn to repent of our sin and to repent of our rebellion and seek the gracious help of the Lord to be delivered from the foe that lurks within our hearts.

It is the only way known to God to make us holy, and seeing we need to be holy by the time we arrive at our great inheritance in glory, it is absolutely inevitable and utterly necessary that, as we journey through life's circumstances, we too from time to time will be allowed to hunger and thirst and suffer distress. We too will be allowed to discover what is within our hearts and taste the bitterness of discovering we are not the nice people we thought we were. We are not the devoted believers that we imagined ourselves to be. At our hearts still there lurks an old rebel. It is the painful lesson that 'I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh' (Rom 7:18). And as with individuals, so with churches. Said Paul to the Corinthians in their day of misery, 'there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized' (1 Cor 11:19). And that which is not of God may be removed.

To that end, God is tough. We rightly praise him because God is love and God is never anything else or less than love. But sheer realism, watching the lives of God's people, would show us that God is tough. His love is not of the meringue variety, all sweetness and brittle. God is tough, for God has great and immense purposes of glory for us, not only to deliver us from our slavery to sin, but eventually to conform us to the image of his glorious Son. We are to be sons and daughters of the most high God, elevated in glory to stations above angels and to sit with Christ upon his imperial throne, he the firstborn among us (see Rom 8:29). God is determined to have it so, and he will stop at nothing, short of sin itself, to form in the hearts of his people the likeness to his Son. Hence the trial and the difficulty and the pain and the disappointment.

### **Confronting the rebellion**

But as the record goes on, it tells us another wonderful thing. It tells us how God met the rebellion in his people that erupted on that occasion, and here is the story. Said God to Moses, 'I will come down and stand on the rock in the presence of the people. I want you to collect the people and to collect the elders of Israel, and bring with you the staff with which you smote the waters in Egypt and turned them into blood' (see Exod 17:5). And Moses did so. He collected the people, and God came down and stood upon the rock. Moses solemnly took the

staff of God in his hand, with which he had smitten Egypt under the terrible judgments of God. And instinctively we think we see what is going to happen. God has had enough of the rebels. God has had enough of their mouths, of their tongues, of their rebellious hearts. God has commanded Moses to take his staff and you can see what's going to happen, can't you? That staff is going to come down, as God has had enough of it.

But things don't work out like that. 'Take your staff,' says God, 'the staff of judgment, and come near to the rock on which I stand, and smite the rock on which I stand.' What was God saying? Well you know if it ever came to pass that her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II, came to some celebration in one of London's parks and they built for her a temporary platform, and she was pleased to come and stand on it in view of the assembled masses; if in that moment some man came out of the crowd and, evading the police cordon, came with a heavy stick in his hand and began to belabour the platform on which her gracious Majesty stood, what would you think it was? The police would have no difficulty in understanding the thing, for if the man was sane and in his right mind, this would be treasonable rebellion against Her Majesty. 'Take your staff, the staff of my judgments,' says God, 'and smite the rock on which I stand. Smite it in the sight of all the people. You might as well, for isn't that what the people have been doing with their tongues anyway?'

### **Judgment falls**

And in our thoughts this morning, we shall presently come not to that rock, but to another hill when God came down to deal with the rebel human heart. We come to Calvary, and consider what was happening. It was, so to speak, the cone of a volcano in which that disobedience and rebellion to God that has smouldered in the heart of every human being all down the centuries, suddenly found its vent and the great volcano of human rebellion spurted out its fires against God's incarnate Son.

And this morning, as we consider Calvary and what was happening, it will not be to blame other people for their rebellion but to see with graphic hindsight what we did there to God incarnate. 'Take your staff with which you smote Egypt and smite the rock on which I stand,' said God. And to our amazement, the staff of his judgment falls not on the people, but on the rock on which God stood. And as presently we draw near to Calvary, we see two things—what our rebel sin did to God's incarnate Son and, in that moment, we see Jehovah himself.

Jehovah lifted up His rod,  
O Christ, it fell on Thee!  
Thou wast sore stricken of Thy God;  
There's not one stroke for me'<sup>2</sup>

Who shall tell us vividly enough that marvellous mystery, God's way with rebels? When our rebellion was at its peak, then so it is written, 'while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son' (Rom 5:10). How can you fight against a God like that? And we sing with the poet,

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<sup>2</sup> Anne R. Cousin (1824-1906), 'O Christ, what burdens bowed Thy head.'

Well might the sun in darkness hide,  
And shut his glories in,  
When the the incarnate Maker died  
For man, His creature's sin.<sup>3</sup>

I do not know how many years you have been on the Christian pathway. You will certainly have had some concept of sin when first you came as a sinner to the Lord Jesus and learnt to value the Lord as the one who died for your sin that you might be forgiven. It is with a deeper note of worship in our hearts that we come this morning with the hindsight perhaps of many years of Christian experience, years full of God's goodness, years full of spiritual progress. But perhaps this morning the things that dwell in the forefront of our minds are those sorrowful occasions when, even as believers, and to our disappointment and to our sorrow, we have found the rebel still lurking in our heart.

As we turn to the emblems and we remember Calvary, we say to ourselves, 'Did he know it? Did he know it when I first came to him? Did he know it when I first promised my allegiance that in the course of life, I would go astray and disobey and rebel and prove selfish and self-willed? Did he know it all?' And the answer is yes: he saw it all in advance. And did he, knowing it, give himself for me? And so it is: that wonderful, inexpressible love of God. And as we remember him this morning, we cry shame on our rebel hearts and find ourselves overwhelmed by the love of God, who loved us while we were yet sinners. God's way with rebels.

### **Warfare and victory**

But then there is a second part to the story. For if Israel on this occasion, discovering the depths of their own hearts, named the place Massah and Meribah to record this ugly fact that they had rebelled against the Lord, they swiftly had another experience in which they proved that, in spite of their rebellion, God was for them. For, says the historian, the first incident was no sooner over than there came Amalek and fought with Israel. That isn't to be wondered at, for Amalek was the inveterate enemy of God—the tribe that would not hesitate to try and overthrow the very throne of God himself.

Then came Amalek and he came at an opportune time. For while Israel were trustfully obedient to the Lord, Amalek kept his distance. But when Israel started to give ground to the enemy and themselves turned to rebel against the Lord, then Amalek was there to help them. Israel now had to decide what they would do. Would they continue with the rebellion and defection against the Lord and join with Amalek? Or would they take their courage in both hands and stand against Amalek and fight the battles of the Lord? 'Rise up,' says Moses to Joshua, 'you must get the people to fight' (see Exod 17:9). And fight they did.

That was a new turn in their history. When they came out of Egypt first and they saw the Egyptian chariots coming up behind them, they cried out in sheer terror, thinking that they were about to be taken back to the concentration camps. For in all those long years of misery in the camps, they had given up all thought of fighting. They tell us that one of the ill effects

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<sup>3</sup> Isaac Watts (1674-1748), 'Alas! and did my Saviour bleed' (1707).



of the concentration camps of the last war was to demonstrate that when people get into such camps, they're not thinking first of liberty. They are thinking of surviving. If you have a taskmaster with a lash, who could be offended by the very way you look, then you'll try to disguise even your feelings. You'll aim to please him. You will become a veritable slave, simply to survive. And so it was with Israel: when they saw the Egyptians coming, they could almost feel the lash again upon their back. 'You fool, Moses,' they said, 'you've brought us here to kill us. Unpleasant as Egypt was, we could at least have survived in the concentration camps.'

In his mercy God at that stage didn't ask them to fight. He said, 'Stand still. I shall fight for you' (see Exod 14:14). That is still blessedly true. As I stand here, I think of a man I knew years and years ago, in the grip of alcoholism. I think of another, who was in the grip of drugs. And the girl who had been delivered from drugs by the power of the Lord, yet knew the strength of the temptation and on a Saturday night, when the temptation would grow strong, some of us would go and sit with her and conduct little Bible studies with her, to help her over the crest of the temptation that still gnawed at her heart. God has a salvation: he it is that has overwhelmed the power of Satan and delivered us from the power of darkness. It is not our strength that has delivered us. It is the strength of God. It is a genuine salvation.

While that is the truth, there remains the other side. When God got Israel out into the wilderness and the time came, then he had to teach them to fight. We can't go to heaven as spineless beings. God has to build into our hearts the willingness and the courage and the ability to stand and face the enemies of God and learn to fight, and so it was here. 'Up,' says God, 'and if the people have learnt their lesson, let them take sides and let them take sides with me, against their former rebellion and against the rebels of the Lord, Amalek and all his crew.'

### **God's provision**

So Israel were told to fight, but notice the lovely provision that God made for them, as now they must learn to begin to fight the enemy. First of all, there was Moses and he went up the hill and sat on the hill with the staff of God in his hand. Same old Moses, same staff of judgment, but now Israel perceived that Moses and his staff were not against them, but for them. As Moses sat on the hill and lifted up his staff in his hands, old Amalek quaked in his shoes and began to retire.

Good old Moses. I don't know about you, but I thank God for Moses still. I need Moses every day of my life as I go out to face the battle. Knowing the old traitor in my own heart and seeing the forces of the rebels against the Lord in the world outside, I need Moses. Moses with his staff and his law saying, 'You mustn't do that,' and, 'You will do this,' and, 'You won't compromise with sin.' I need good old Moses up on the mountain to fight for me. I could never be saved by keeping his law, but I do need his law and the holy commandments of God. These are my friends now, fighting for me against the rebellion of sin. Good old Moses.

And then down on the plain, God gave them Joshua to be the captain of their salvation. God explained to Moses, 'It's not your war really: it's my war.' For the Lord has determined that he will have war against Amalek until he has utterly blotted Amalek out from under heaven (Exod 17:14). It's the Lord's war and, my brethren, my sisters, we have the privilege

this morning of joining a war that is cosmic in its proportions. It is no news to any of us that there has taken place a revolt at the highest level in the heavens, and mighty and majestic principalities and powers have been turned to rebel against the Almighty. Their rebellion has infected our very planet here, and the Lord has determined to have war with them. The Lord has determined to blot out from the very heaven and from the earth all memory of such rebellion. And God himself has raised his military standard to lead his army. He invites us once more today to come and join up under his colours and fight the battle of the Lord.

I'm glad it's his war and not mine, because God never did undertake a war that he hasn't won. He's going to win this war too. He's going to subdue the rebel. Praise God, he has taken us in hand and will not finish with us either, until he has subdued utterly, and eventually cast out, the rebel that lurks within our breasts. Until he does, we have our Joshua too, commander of the army of the Lord to lead us in the battles of the Lord. He who learnt what it cost to obey, by what he suffered. He has been appointed captain of our salvation, to become the author of eternal salvation to those who in turn obey him. So they called the altar 'Jehovah-Nissi', 'the Lord, my military banner'.

Two names were written indelibly on the pages of Israel's history. Two names are likewise written indelibly on the page of our human history, as we look back on its days and journeys. The one is 'Massah and Meribah', as we remember that we once were rebels against the King. That we often have rebelled against him, even though we were believers, and record the fact that, in us, dwells no good thing. Ah, but we have the other name and it says 'Jehovah-Nissi'. Knowing all about us, he loved us just the same. God is for us and, because he fights for us, 'we are more than conquerors through him who loved us' (Rom 8:37).

May the Lord use his word to stir our hearts and evoke our deepening worship and allegiance to him.

## About the Author

**DAVID W. GOODING (1925-2019)** was Professor of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He published scholarly articles on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John, Acts, Hebrews, the New Testament's use of the Old Testament, and several books addressing arguments against the Bible and the Christian faith. His analysis of the Bible and our world continues to shape the thinking of scholars, teachers and students alike.