

**You Shall Know I AM:
God in the Dock (Exodus 17)**

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on November 18, 2018

Introduction

- ❖ If you've been with us the past few months, we've been in the book of Exodus. Our plan is to cover the entire book but in two parts. Today will be the last message in Part 1, and we'll pick back up sometime in 2019. Next week, we're going to start a mini-series through the book of Jonah with a missions emphasis, leading up to CMC South. The four pastors of the church will be sharing this series together, so you'll get a chance to hear from Pastor Joseph and Pastor Thomas (and Fred and I will be preaching in the Chinese congregation as well).

- ❖ So today I want to wrap up with chapter 17. Let me remind you of the setting where our story takes place. Not much more than a month earlier, the Israelites had experienced a great salvation as God parted the Red Sea and delivered them from the Egyptians. But then he led them straight into the wilderness. **And we saw last week how God tested them – how he allowed them to experience thirst and hunger – in order to teach them to trust and obey.** That's why he tests his people. Not because he's trying to weed them out but because he's trying to build them up.
 - Now this kind of testing is God's prerogative. As the LORD Almighty, he has every right to test his people. Which is what makes the actions of the Israelites that much more shocking. **We read in our passage that the people have turned the table on God and they're trying to test him.** Let me read v2, *"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?"*

- ❖ **So it looks like they've put God in the dock.** That phrase comes from an essay by C.S. Lewis. The dock is referring to the enclosure found in older criminal courtroom where the defendant would sit. **So to be put "in the dock" means to be put on trial.**
 - And that's essentially what the Israelites are doing to the LORD. By testing him, they are putting him in the dock. They're putting him on trial. Questioning him like a prosecutor would. It's pretty audacious.

- ❖ Lewis's point in his essay is that modern man (humanity today) has embraced this same role reversal. **We have audaciously ascended the Judge's bench. Cloaked ourselves in the Judge's robe. And placed God in the dock.**
 - Lewis was trying to analyze the barriers that modern Christians are going to face when trying to present an ancient faith to modern unbelievers. **His point is that if you approach them with a focus on their sins and assume they're carrying around a sense of guilt before God the Judge – you're *not* going to connect with most modern unbelievers.** It's because they see *themselves* on the bench and God in the dock, so most of the sins we assume they feel guilt for are actually tolerated and normalized. That's what makes sharing the gospel in our day so challenging.
 - If we want to connect the gospel to modern unbelievers, then pointing out their overt sins is not going to work. **Focusing on their behavior – their outward sins – and how the gospel is the solution is not going to get you very far.** Because they don't judge their behavior according to God's Word.

- ❖ **That gospel conversation will go a lot further if you address their inward needs – their emptiness, their spiritual hunger and thirst – and demonstrate how the gospel is the answer.** Show them how faith in Christ – in his life, death, and resurrection – is going to satisfy and quench those deepest longings. That’s a subjective reality that modern unbelievers can identify with. That’s how you connect them to the gospel.
 - That’s what this morning’s passage tries to do. **We’re going to see the Israelites struggle with a deep thirst that God quenches in a surprising way.** I’ve broken our message into three parts. We’ll look at 1) The questioning of God, 2) The trial of God, and 3) The presence of God.

The Questioning of God

- ❖ Let’s begin with the questioning of God. That’s what we see the Israelites doing in the beginning of chapter 17. We’re told that God continued to move the Israelites from place to place, and now he leads them to a new location to make camp. It’s called Rephidim, which means “resting place”, but it was far from restful because there was no water to drink.
 - Previously, in chapter 15:22, they had water but it wasn’t drinkable. **They grumbled against God, and yet he was merciful to an embittered people and sweetened the water for them.** But this time around, there wasn’t even any water to sweeten. So in v2, as we just read, the people quarreled with Moses, demanding water.
 - Look in v3, *“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 they’re questioning Moses’s motives. Why did you bring us up out of Egypt? Just to kill us in the wilderness? They’re deeply suspicious of his motives. To the point that Moses is worried they’re going to kill him. In v4, he complains to the LORD, *“What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.”*
 - **He needs to help them see that their quarrel is not really with him but with God.** They’re really quarreling with God. They’re questioning God and his motives because ultimately Moses is only leading them as he’s being led by the pillar of cloud coming from God.

- ❖ What’s happening to them is really a common human condition. **When we experience dissatisfaction in life – when these deep inner thirsts go unquenched – we get disillusioned and grow disappointed in God.** If you’re a nonbeliever, it just confirms your assumption that there is no God. If you’re a believer, it leads you to question him.
 - **Can we count on God? Can we trust his motives? Does he really have my best in mind? Is he really there for me?** This is what the Israelites dealt with. These are the questions they asked. Look at v7, *“And [Moses] called the name of the place Massah (testing) and Meribah (quarreling), because of the quarreling of the people of Israel, and because they tested the LORD by saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?””*
 - Because they’re not sure, they so quickly turn their eyes back to Egypt or to idols, which is a problem that continues to plague them. **It’s because they’re not sure if the LORD is among them or not.**

- ❖ **But do you see how audacious and insulting it is for the Israelites to ask that question?** I'm fairly certain that morning, when they woke up, there was fresh manna on the ground. I'm sure they were able to gather enough to feed themselves and their herds. Because that's what it said back in chapter 16:35. For forty straight years, God provided manna on a daily basis until they came to habitable land. So there was definitely manna there that morning.
 - But later in the day, when they discover there's no water, the Israelites are quick to quarrel and slow to trust that God is going to somehow provide as he already has time and time again. **They have clear evidence of his gracious provision in front of them, and yet they fixate on what's missing.** And they quarrel and grumble.

- ❖ **Imagine a teenager whose mother prepares his lunch every single school day and always has a warm meal ready when he comes home.** But one day he comes home from school with his stomach growling, goes into the kitchen and sees that his mom hasn't started cooking, and has the audacity to ask, "Mom, are we going to have any dinner tonight or not?"
 - He has clear evidence every day of his mother's provision, and yet he's fixated on what's missing – on his empty stomach. Do you see? He's not just questioning if there's dinner tonight. **He's questioning his mother's intentions – her goodness and ability to provide for his needs.**

- ❖ So this question – "*Is the LORD among us or not?*" – is just as insulting to God. They're testing him. That's what v7 says, "*they tested the LORD by saying, 'Is the LORD among us or not?'*" What's he going to do about our water problem? They're testing him. They're putting God in the dock.
 - That word for *quarrel* is used elsewhere in the OT to describe indicting someone (Micah 6:2) or calling for judgment (Amos 7:4; Isa. 3:13). **So to quarrel against God and to test him is to put him on trial – on a trial that centers on the question of whether or not God is really there for us.** What he does about this water problem is going to tell us if he's really among us.
 - But that's like the teenager using the provision of dinner as a test of his mother's goodness and faithful presence in his life. That's how the Israelites are using the provision of water. Is the LORD really good? Is he really there for us? That's what they're testing to see.

- ❖ Friends, we have to recognize how we do the same. **How we tend to overlook all the evidence of God's good grace and provision in our lives and how we fixate on what's missing.** "God, why haven't you answered this prayer? Why haven't you given me that acceptance letter? Why haven't you given me that job? Why haven't you given me a spouse? Why haven't you given me a child?"
 - **Whatever that thing we're missing is on our minds, and we're using it to judge the goodness of God's providence.** Maybe using it to judge whether he's present or not. We've put God in the dock. He's on trial in our minds. Is the LORD really there for me? I don't know. I'm not so sure anymore.

The Trial of God

- ❖ This is how many of us treat God. We put him on trial. I've done it. **But it's the way he responds to being tested that blows my mind and puts me back in my place.** This leads to our second point. Let's consider the trial of God.
 - So after the people quarrel and put God to the test, after Moses complains to God and fears for his life, then the LORD responds in v5. *"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."*

- ❖ **Now when Moses passes before them with the staff of God in hand, I can only imagine what those Israelites were thinking.** They were probably fidgeting and sweating, nervous as to what he was going to do with that staff. They've seen it in action. They've seen it turn into a serpent. They've seen it used to strike the Nile and turn it to blood. They've seen it used to part the Red Sea. They know by now that it represents the sovereign power of Yahweh. **So what is Moses going to do with that staff? Is he going to strike us with it?**
 - But that's what makes God's response so fascinating. Look at what the LORD says in v6, *"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.*

- ❖ You don't want to miss what's happening here. When God says *"I will stand before you"*, that idea of standing before someone, in ancient times, was used to describe someone standing before a king to face judgment of some kind. **Which is shocking because you would've thought it would be the other way around. They should be standing before the LORD.**
 - But it's LORD standing before the people on the rock at Horeb. That's another name for Sinai. Most commentators think it's some rocky outcrop around Mt. Sinai or perhaps at the base of it. It's basically an ancient dock. **Now you would think God would ascend the bench and play the Judge in this trial. But instead he's positioning himself as the defendant.** He's standing on the rock.

- ❖ Now pay attention to what he says next. **He says strike the rock – the rock *he's* standing on. That's another way of saying, "Strike me."** The Israelites probably thought that God was going to tell Moses to strike them. They're the one quarreling and grumbling. They deserve to be struck. But instead, God takes the strike.
 - Do you see what's happening here? They have a quarrel with God. They want to blame him. **But he's here bearing *their* blame and receiving *their* blow, and out of this act of self-substitutionary love, life-giving water begins to flow.**

- ❖ This is how God answers their question. They're not sure if the LORD is really there for them. And this is how he answers. He says, **"I am so for you that I will take your place in the dock. I will take your punishment. I will be struck and out of me will flow living waters that will quench your deepest thirsts."**

- ❖ That's how God shows people that he's there for them. He demonstrates his grace. **He bears their blame, so they can enjoy his unmerited kindness.** That's how he proves that he's among his people.
- ❖ **This incident on the rock points, of course, to a greater show of grace in the pages of the NT.** I want you to see how the Apostle Paul interprets and applies our passage to the church. Turn with me to **1 Corinthians 10**, and let me set the context for you. Paul is in the middle of writing to the Corinthians, warning them not to participate in the idolatrous feasts that take place in pagan temples (10:20-21).
 - Most likely these Christians were tempted to still join in these feasts – not because they actually sought to worship the particular god or goddess – but because that's where the guilds met and conducted business. **So to stop going to these feasts would put you in a severe economic disadvantage.** From a practical standpoint – if you wanted to provide for your family – you felt like you had to participate, even though these feasts featured idol worship and sexually immoral activity.
- ❖ **And apparently some of these Corinthian assumed their baptism and their participation in the Lord's Supper offered some sort of spiritual protection, making them impervious to the effects of idolatry and sexual immorality.** Paul says, "No, you should know better. You have the OT. You have the book of Exodus. You have the wilderness generation of Israel as a test case and example. You saw what happened to them at Massah and Meribah."
 - Let me read 1 Corinthians 10:1-6, "*For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, ²and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, ³and all ate the same spiritual food, ⁴and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.*" **So Paul is drawing a general comparison between the passing of the Red Sea and Christian baptism, as well connecting the miracles of manna and water from the rock to the Lord's Supper.**
- ❖ **Now Paul makes a fascinating interpretive move here when he identifies that Rock in the wilderness with Christ.** But it's not that novel when you consider the many times in the OT when God is identified as Israel's Rock (cf. Deut. 32:4, 15, 18, 30, 31).
 - So Paul is just extending that analogy to Christ. To say that Christ was the Rock is to suggest that Christ was the one sustaining them with life-giving water for forty years in the wilderness. **To say that Christ was the Rock is to say that Christ was the one being struck by Moses's staff.** Christ stood on the rock. Christ stood in the dock.
- ❖ Which means, when he ascended his cross, Jesus was completing what he started in the wilderness. **Just as he did in Exodus, Christ was once again substituting himself in the place of sinners.** Bearing their blame. Receiving their blows. And out of this act of self-substitutionary love, mercy and forgiveness began to flow. **Our deepest thirst, our greatest human need – to be reconciled with our Creator – is sufficiently quenched by the sacrifice of Christ.**

- ❖ Friends, God could not have loved you more than this. **He could not have shown, in any greater way, that he is for you and there for you – than by sending his Son to bear your blame and to be struck down for you.** Jesus allowed himself to be put on trial because he knew his Father would vindicate him by the Resurrection. **If you're looking for proof that God is among us and for us, then look no further than the Crucified and Risen Christ.**

- ❖ Now let's stay in Paul's argument. **He's saying that Christ was the one nourishing Israel in the wilderness, and yet they rebelled and committed idolatry.** And their baptism in the sea and their feeding on spiritual food and drink did not make them impervious to judgment. Keep reading in v5, "*5Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness. 6Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. 7Do not be idolaters as some of them were.*"
 - Paul's point to the Corinthians is that if you're participating in sin and idolatry – no matter your excuse, no matter how practical it might sound – **you're fooling yourself to put any assurance in your participation in baptism or the Supper.** The Israelites serve as an example to us. Their example demonstrates that you can be baptized, you can take communion, and yet you can be overthrown if you don't flee idolatry. Paul's not suggesting that Christians are never tempted by idolatry. **But he is suggesting that a Christian will desire to flee idolatry when it rears its ugly head.**

- ❖ **Now in our day, idolatry doesn't usually take the form of feasting in a pagan temple, but it could look like making compromises to your faith in order to stay competitive or to stay relevant with your colleagues or classmates.** "I've got to cut corners because everyone else does. I've got to overwork because I've got to provide for my family. I've got to hang out with my colleagues even though it's in an environment steeped in immorality."
 - **Whatever the compromise, we tend to justify it by appealing to practical reasons** – much like how a Corinthian would justify going to an idolatrous feast and much like how an Israelite would justify collecting more manna than allowed or not observing the Sabbath or just complaining about the lack of water.

- ❖ But why we compromise is because, deep down, we're not sure if the LORD is there for us. Is he among us or not? **When we're not sure, we take matters into our own hands and we look to other things and other people for answers.** That's the definition of idolatry.
 - But God has vindicated himself and proven his love for us in *not* sparing his own Son. He put him in the dock and put him on the cross. It reminds me of something else Paul said in his letter to the Romans. **Romans 8:32** says, "*He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?*" Is the LORD among us or not? Exhibit A is Christ on the cross.

The Presence of God

- ❖ Now if we turn back to Exodus 17, the final answer to Israel's question in v7 – is the LORD among us or not? – won't come until a thousand years later in the coming of Christ. Jesus is God's final answer. But he still offers some answer in our text. Let's briefly look at this battle with the Amalekites and see the presence of God. This is our third point.

- ❖ We're introduced in v8 to Amalek, an ancient tribal people whose namesake was the grandson of Esau. So they were distant relatives to the Israelites, who are descendants of Jacob, Esau's twin brother. **The ancient feud between the brothers would explain the bad blood here and why the Amalekite army would surprise attack Israel.**
 - We know the attack was unprovoked attack based on **Deuteronomy 25:17–18**. It says, *"¹⁷Remember what Amalek did to you on the way as you came out of Egypt, ¹⁸how 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."* So the Amalekites ruthlessly attacked the tail end where the weakest, oldest, and slowest were located.

- ❖ Here in v9, Joshua is introduced for the first time. He's going to play a prominent role as a military leader leading Israel into the Promised Land, and here we see why he's qualified for the part. He's faithful and obedient to Moses and ultimately to God.
 - **Now when Joshua led the men to battle the next day, Moses took Aaron and Hur with him on top of a hill overlooking the battlefield.** We know Aaron, his brother. We don't know Hur. Jewish tradition maintains that he's Miriam's husband, Moses's brother-in-law. And we're also told that Moses had the staff of God in hand.
 - Let's start reading in v11, *"¹¹Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed, and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed. ¹²But 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. ¹³And Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the sword."*

- ❖ **Sometimes this story is used to emphasize the importance of prayer.** It's noted how in the ancient world, prayer was often conducted with hands lifted (Ps. 28:2; 63:4; 1 Tim. 2:8). And with the assistance of Aaron and Hur, there's usually an application on the importance of praying together, helping each other to persevere in prayer.
 - I see why some would go in that direction, but I'm not sure if Moses was simply praying. I'm sure he was praying for victory. But I don't think the emphasis is on Moses's hands and his perseverance in prayer. **The emphasis is on the staff of God in Moses's hands – the staff that symbolized the presence and power of God.**

- ❖ **Holding it high up in the air sent a clear message to the Israelites that we're only winning this battle because God is fighting for us.** And the fact that God allowed the battle to swing the other way every time Moses got tired and lowered the staff – just goes to show how important the presence of the LORD is.
 - **I think that's why there's such a focus on the staff of God in both stories in this chapter.** As long as the staff of God is in action, you're going to get water from that rock or victory in that battle – because it means that God is there among us and he's acting on our behalf.

- ❖ **Church, the LORD truly is present. He's really there for us and among us, fighting our battles, leading us to the Promised Rest.** That's the point of this little vignette. But the problem is we're so prone to forget and so quick to get discouraged in the face of battles. **That's why we need help to remember the powerful presence of God in our lives.** That's what the LORD instructs Moses to do in v14. To help his people remember.
 - Keep reading in v14, "*¹⁴Then 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."*

- ❖ So God instructs Moses to write a book (literally a scroll) about what happened. So we can pass on this story about God's powerful presence in their lives. And then he's supposed to build an altar. Look at v15, "*¹⁵And Moses built an altar and called the name of it, The LORD Is My Banner, ¹⁶saying, "A hand upon the throne of the LORD! The LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation."*

 - That word for banner is refers to a signal pole or a battle standard used to rally troops. That's how the staff was being utilized. And when Moses said his hand was upon the LORD's throne, he meant that when he held up the staff, it was like holding up the throne of God. **The LORD was essentially sitting on his throne, sovereignly ruling over the battle, leading them to victory.**

- ❖ Church, we don't set up altars anymore to help us remember these truths. The Cross and the Empty Tomb serve that purpose now. **But just like Moses, we need others to help us not forget.** We need more Aarons and Hurs in our lives to help us remember. We need church members to hold up our arms. That is, we need each other to regularly remind each other that – no matter how tough the battle we're going through – the LORD is still on his throne and he truly is among us.