

A Hand on the Throne of the Lord!

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[0 : 00] Two of the most overused phrases in our house are, I need a drink and I need a snack.

! I've developed a kind of nervous twitch when I hear those words roughly 10,000 times a day.! You too might be groaning inwardly as you hear these words in the book of Exodus, I need a drink. It's a complaint that we've heard the past two Sundays. What shall we drink? We had a variation of that last time, didn't we? We're dying of hunger. And again this morning, verse 2, the people quarreled with Moses and said, give us water to drink. Now hang on Moses, actually what we're really saying is, why did you bring us up out of Egypt to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst? You know, if you think you're tired of hearing God's people complain, imagine how Moses felt when they said that all he'd really wanted all along was to kill their kids.

But there is more going on here than yet more grumbling. You know, maybe as we read chapter 17, you wondered what these two halves of the chapter have to do with each other. One minute, we've got water kind of miraculously pouring out of a rock. At the next minute, we've got the weirdest strategy ever used in battle. You know, have we just stuck two passages together to save us from having to talk so much about grumbling this week? Well, surprisingly, no. This is one passage with one message. We can hold it all together in one hand. And I don't just mean that figuratively.

Just glance down at verse 5 with me. The Lord said to Moses, pass on before the people and take in your hand. In the second half of the chapter, we get the word hand or hands used seven times. Verses 9, 11, 12, 16, every time referring to Moses' hands, lifted over his head, drooping, growing weary, being held up. Moses' hands hold it all together. And what's in his hands?

The rest of verse 5, take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile. It's there again in verse 9. Tomorrow I will stand on top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand.

[2 : 40] What holds this chapter together? Moses' hands, holding the staff with which God comforted his people and struck his enemies, split the sea to make a safe path through for his people, and brought the sea back down upon the heads of his enemies, saved his people, and judged his enemies.

And what is the staff of God in Moses' hands doing here? Saving his people, verses 1 to 7, and judging his enemies, verses 8 to 16. Of course, it's not the staff itself that does that. It's not a magic staff.

Nor is it really Moses' hands. They're hands that get tired and weak, but the Lord threw Moses and his staff. Think of all that this, what is essentially, right, a stick of wood. We've got a good stick collection outside of our front door. Moses has a stick of wood in his hands, but think of all that it has come to represent God's sovereign power to command the creation itself. Darkness, dust, water, disease, death, to fight for his people and deliver them. And now that very same sovereign saving power is seen doing the very same things in the wilderness on the way.

That, I think, is the point for them then and us now to grasp. That's this side of the Red Sea. This side of the cross and resurrection. On our way to the promised land, through the wilderness of this world. Is the Lord still with us to save us and protect us?

That was the grumble behind the grumble, if you like, back then. It's interesting, we don't hear it at the time, but Moses tells us at the very end of the first half of the chapter that this is what they said.

[4 : 50] Is the Lord among us or not? All that saving power, was that just to break us out of the kingdom of darkness? Or will we keep seeing it, keep experiencing it now that we're on our way? Is the Lord with us here in the wilderness or not?

And the answer, I think, comes at the end of the second half of the chapter. 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 same hand by which the Lord saved them out of Egypt is still resting upon God's throne in the wilderness.

By that hand, he will faithfully keep saving his people, and faithfully keep judging his enemies all the way until his people are safely home.

That's what they needed to hear then. I trust that that is what we need to hear now. Is the Lord among us or not? Brothers and sisters, the answer today is a resounding yes.

Yes, there is a hand upon the throne of the Lord. And if our hand is in the hand of the one holding on to the throne of God, then we have been, are being, and will be saved by him and protected forever.

Let's see that together in our passage then. Our first point, he will faithfully keep saving his people. The start of our passage sounds eerily familiar. God's people on the way through the wilderness, and they find they don't have what they need. Last time there was water, but it wasn't drinkable. This time there is not a drop, not a trickle. It's worth saying again, as it has been already, that this is a very valid need. I don't know about you, I sometimes need to do a kind of evaluation of my inner shopping list and sort out what are needs and what are wants.

[7 : 07] We might say, might we, I need new clothes, when in fact in the cupboard we have clothes that fit, that are fine. If we could survive without having new clothes, what we mean is, I want some new clothes, I would prefer some new clothes. Because God often provides for us way above and beyond what we need, we often have the means to have the things that we want, don't we?

And that's not a bad thing. But if we run our lives through that grid, there's really very little that we really need to live. But basic food and water are on that list, aren't they? A human being can live about three weeks without food, three days without water. So God's people are not wrong to need water.

And yet, in light of all that they have seen God do for them up to this point, to name just the watery miracles. Water turns to blood, splitting the sea in two, making foul water drinkable.

They are wrong to do this. Verse 2. Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, give us water to drink. It's silly to argue with Moses about it as if he had a secret stash of water somewhere that he wasn't sharing. Why do you quarrel with me, he says. I don't know why he passed. It's a great example, I think, of the way that our responses are often not responses to the situation in front of us, but our responses to our interpretation of the situation. Objectively, what was Moses meant to have done about it? He too is made up 60% of water and he too is with them there in the desert. But presumably, he is just as thirsty as they are. Their quarrel comes from the story that they're telling themselves about the situation. What's that story? Verse 3. The people grumbled against Moses and said, why did you bring us up out of Egypt? To kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?

[9 : 20] Do you hear the fake news in their grumble? You, Moses, brought us out of Egypt. You're the reason we're in the desert, so you must be the reason we're thirsty and we're all definitely going to die.

Now, is that, would you say, a fair interpretation of the book that we have been reading up to this point? For one thing, where is God in this story? He's the one who saved them out of Egypt, slavery and darkness, right? Where's the hope in their story? The Lord has never as yet let them down.

The story they're telling themselves is essentially an atheistic interpretation of their situation, but it's not an accurate one. The situation at hand would look really different, wouldn't it, if they flicked back through the last 16 chapters of Exodus and remembered who'd really brought them to this point, who he was and what he had done. I am who I am. I am the Lord who saves you.

Friends, on our way past in this point, before you react, before you pick a fight with someone, before you grumble, before you say a word, check yourself.

Am I reading this situation rightly? Is the story that I'm telling myself about this the right one? Am I thinking and feeling like a non-believer? Or can I step back and see how the Lord has brought me to this point? That he is doing something? And when has he or ever will he let me down?

[11 : 12] They need water. That much is true. But they read their situation all wrong. And so they wrongly pick a fight with Moses. And they're totally wrong to do what they're really doing, which Moses points out to them in verse 2.

Not only why do you quarrel with me, but why do you test the Lord? The last two times they've grumbled, the Lord has said he will test his people to see whether they will listen and obey his word. Not only did he keep his word and give them everything that they needed, but they then failed his tests. And now they are testing him. The student, they think, has become the master.

Sometimes people, don't they, try to bargain with God? Something like this. I'll try harder to be a better person if, God, you give me that position at work. I'll get married in a church, God, if you give me someone who I can marry. Friends, we can't bargain with God. For one thing, he is the one being in existence who does not need anything. What do we think we can offer him that he hasn't first given to us?

You setting little tests for God to pass in our lives is a sure sign that we are setting ourselves over him in our hearts. His right to our faith and obedience doesn't depend on him jumping through our personal hoops to earn it. But if we're Christians, the tests that we set the Lord will probably be subtler than that. I've prayed for a change in my circumstances, maybe for a long time.

A new job, better relationships at home, health and healing for my loved ones, less stress in my life. I'm doing my best and he's not doing anything about it. I don't know why I keep praying because nothing ever changes. Now, brothers and sisters, that can be a real test for us.

[13:24] That is a difficult thing to bear. Seasons where we are not seeing the Lord do what we would have him do.

But we are not to turn our trials into a test of his faithfulness and his love. When, after all, did he promise you a new job? An easy marriage, time to relax, good health? He promises to meet all of our needs. He hasn't promised us the things that we want or prefer. And neither has he promised us to give us what we need in the way that we want him to. The people needed water. He wanted, they wanted it right now. He had shown them that they could trust him to provide, but they didn't trust him.

And so they put him to the test. All in all, it's very clear that God's people really, really need saving. They need saved from dying of thirst. They need saved from their bitterness. They need saved from their unbelief. And so Moses cried to the Lord. And again, notice, without a word of reproach, he saves them. Just have a look with me at verse 5 and 6. The Lord said to Moses, Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel, taking your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. Behold, I will stand before you there at the rock at Horeb, and you will strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink. And Moses did so. It's a miraculous rescue. I'm sure that the water was very welcome. Though it's interesting, isn't it? We're not told what the people said, if anything, when it came. But the way that the Lord does this miracle is supposed to say something important to them. How does he choose to save them? Through the staff in the same hand that struck the Nile, he said, and turned it to blood. If you remember back, that was the very first plague or first strike at the beginning of God's rescue of his people in chapter 7. It's an interesting way, I think, to refer to that staff given how much it's been through in the last 17 chapters. Not the staff with which you divided the sea, for example, but the staff with which you struck the Nile. What's the message?

The very same power that saved you in the beginning is the very same power that is here to save you now. Is the Lord among us or not?

Maybe you look back as a Christian and wonder where it all changed. Everything was so fresh, so exciting, new. As a new believer, a young believer, you were so aware of the Lord's power and grace towards you that saved you from your sins. Some of you mercifully are there today.

[16:37] Cherish that. But some of us look back and wonder where did that saving power go? What happened to my first love? I'm so thirsty. I'm so spiritually dry. I've been on the way a long time. Am I even going to make it to the end? I struggle to count it all joy when I face trials of various kinds because the testing of my faith doesn't so much produce endurance as annoyance.

Envy, bitterness, grumbling, pride. My sin doesn't feel less present in my life. It's just mutated. Now I sin in ways that I couldn't have dreamed of when I became a Christian.

Where is he? Is the Lord among us or not? Friends, if you feel like it's gotten harder the longer that you've been a Christian, you're not alone. It certainly felt that way to the Israelites in the desert. I trust it feels that way for all of us on the way. But the Savior who saw and found you in the beginning is the same Savior who today carries you on his shoulders. The work that he finished on the cross is the same finished work that today gives you rest from your works. The grace that made your heart new at first is the same grace that sustains and feeds your soul today. The gospel that saved you when you first believed is the same gospel that is saving you now as you cling to its promises by faith.

Friends, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. The same Jesus who walked the earth, died on the cross and rose again, now sits in heaven and will come again in the same way

that they saw him leave. As he was in the beginning, is now and ever will be our Savior, our Shepherd, Guardian Friend, our Prophet, Priest, and King, our Lord, our Life, our Way, our End, for all who cling to him.

Jesus said on earth, whoever drinks of the water that I give them will never be thirsty again. The water that I give will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.

[19 : 15] Friends, that promise is as true today as the day he said it. He can give us that water today that is eternal life that begins now and lasts forever. If you are dry, weary, sore, grumbling, however long you've been on the road of Christian life, or if you know that you're not on that road today, come to him. Drink freely of his grace and we need never be thirsty again, for he will faithfully keep saving his people by the very same power by which he saved us at the first.

And by that same power, he will also faithfully keep judging his enemies. That's our second point this morning. The Amalekites appear in verse 8. We're not told why or why now, but Moses has a plan. Joshua will lead the ground troops and he'll take a commanding position up on the heights. In passing, this is the first time we ever hear about Joshua. He becomes a really important person in biblical history. He becomes Moses' assistant and then his successor. He has a book named after him, the book of Joshua in the Bible. So just keep a little eye out to him as we go through Exodus and see what he's about.

But the key thing, which hopefully you'll have picked up by now, is that from his lofty vantage point, Moses will be able to see the whole battlefield as he stands on top of the hill, he says, with the staff of God in his hand.

Because the same staff by which he saved his people, Israel, is the same staff with which he judged his enemies, Egypt, and now Amalek.

[21 : 09] And so Joshua follows orders and Moses goes up the hill. Now, disclaimer, what happens next is highly unusual.

Battles are normally won, aren't they, with force. There was a series a while back on what you now know is my favorite podcast, The Rest is History.

I promise I'm not being paid to promote them. This series was about the fall of the Aztecs. In the final battle for the Aztec capital, the Spanish conquistadors and their allies were running riot.

The Aztecs had put up an incredibly brave fight, but this was the final stand. And they had one last card left to play, or so they thought. They'd held off, held off.

Because they believed that if they used this weapon, it would mean the end, not only of both sides of the war, Aztec and Spanish alike, but the end of the world.

[22 : 10] An apocalyptic weapon, the nuclear option. But they were so desperate that they decided it was now or never. And so they did it. They dressed a guy in this ancient ritual outfit designed to look like an owl.

The idea was that as soon as he entered the battle in all this gear, the world would come to an end, and that would be it. Instead, what happened is that he stepped out of the window onto a rooftop, was immediately shot, fell down, and died.

The world didn't end, and the Spanish conquered the city. Normally, battles are won and lost by force. But this is something different.

This battle is not won or lost on the battlefield, but far above the battlefield. From the top of the hill, we read verse 11, Whenever Moses held up his hand, presumably holding the staff, Israel prevailed.

Whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed. The tide of the battle is literally turning, depending on the position of Moses' hands and the staff of God in his hands.

[23 : 24] This is not myth or superstition. This is the power of God to fight for his people against their enemies. But there is a problem with the strategy, because there is a single point of failure.

What if Moses can't hold up his hands anymore? Indeed, we are told, verse 12, Moses' hands grew weary. Lest we think for a moment that the power lay in Moses, his hands, or the stick of wood that he is holding.

He is Moses. But Moses is just a man. A creature of dust. In his own strength, he can't even hold a staff above his head, let alone save anyone.

And so we get this strange scene where Moses is sat down on this stone, with his hands being held up on either side of him by this guy, Her, and his brother, Aaron.

It wonderfully captures, I think, both the sense in which Moses, as the chosen instrument of God, really holds the fate of God's people in his hands.

[24 : 30] And the sense in which Moses, as the man, now quite elderly, shares all the weakness and frailty of his people, and couldn't ever have done any of it, unless the Lord had been at work.

He is the shadow of Christ. But here we are reminded, he is not the Christ. And so in that way, the staff in his hands over his head, the day closed and the battle was won.

Now we might well ask, why bother talking about judgment at all, right? Isn't God saving his people? Couldn't we talk about that just in a different way? Well, he is saving his people.

But that's not where Exodus takes us. We have to talk about God's judgment here, because in verse 14, God talks about his own judgment. Then the Lord said to Moses, write this as a memorial in a book, recite it in the ears of Joshua.

This is the lesson from the battle. I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.

On the way back from captivity, a gang comes up in the street to mug the firstborn son who has been rescued out of slavery.

[25 : 52] What does dad do? Surely he sees off the muggers, phones the police, and vows to put them behind bars. The Lord swears that he will see justice done on those who have come to harm his people.

That might sound a strange thing to say in the peace and relative comfort of Aberdeen this morning. But imagine gathering in a very different situation in another part of the world.

Believers in North Korea, Somalia, Yemen, just the first three on the Open Doors World Watch list, where Christians are persecuted most fiercely in the world, kept under surveillance, separated from their families, put in prison, tortured, brainwashed, attacked, put to death.

Imagine hearing this, brothers and sisters, one day the memory of the Kim dynasty will be blotted out forever from under heaven. They are already under God's holy judgment.

Their evil will be fully brought to light and full justice will be done. A day will come in history when no one will remember who on earth Kim Jong-un was or what he did.

[27 : 19] But the names of those who he harmed, put in prison, put to death for the name of Jesus, will live forever in the Lamb's Book of Life.

Because the Lord is a God who does not let his children be picked on endlessly without bringing judgment on their enemies. What a promise for us, brothers and sisters, and the global church to hold on to today.

We pray, don't we, that we wouldn't have enemies like that in our lifetime, but there is nothing to say that we won't. Many of our brothers and sisters around the world do today.

What good news that the Lord will faithfully judge all his and our enemies? So how do we hold on to that promise in the darkness with the threat of opposition, of persecution, on the way through the wilderness?

Well, what is Moses holding on to? Yes, a staff. But what do his raised hands holding the staff represent? He tells us, verse 16, a hand upon the throne of the Lord.

[28 : 38] He is holding God's throne. And it is an amazing thing that you and I can do that same thing today, put a hand on the throne of the Lord.

We've done that this morning. The King of creation has gathered us, summoned us before his throne. We have bowed before him and spoken to him in prayer, asked him to rule over and defend us, restrain and conquer all his and our enemies.

Hopefully, if you could, you voted on Thursday. It's a great thing to live in a country where we can do that. But what if I told you that the most direct political action you could take, the most influential thing that you could do, to shape the future of our country or the history of the world was this, to put your hand on the throne of God in heaven and speak to him about the challenges, the hurdles, the opposition his church faces here and throughout the earth.

What if the most radical political slogan that could ever cross our lips was, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven, brothers and sisters, we cannot, can we stroll into Holyrood or Westminster, Beijing, Moscow, Washington and change what happens.

But we can freely walk up to God's throne in heaven whenever we wish to and the king of heaven will listen to our prayers and act according to his perfect will and timing both to save and to judge.

[30 : 25] Why would we not place a hand on his throne each day in prayer and ask him boldly and with expectation to do what he has promised for his people?

