

Rally behind the Lord

by **Scott Grant**

Demands in Capernaum

In Capernaum, Jesus cast out an unclean spirit from a man, he healed Simon's mother-in-law and he healed many others who were afflicted by demons and diseases. Soon "the whole city had gathered at the door" of the house at which he was staying. But early one morning, he departed to a lonely place, leaving behind all those who had expectations for him. Simon, though, hunted him down to inform him, "Everyone is looking for you." Jesus, in the face of these expectations and demands, said, "Let us go somewhere else to the towns nearby ... " (Mark 1:21-39). What? And disappoint all these people? Jesus rose above the demands.

How was it that he could do that? The key in understanding it lies in recognizing his reason for getting away from the crowds: He went away to pray (Mark 1:35). It was his intimate relationship with the Father that allowed him to rise above the demands that people placed on him. Some days later, though, he returned to Capernaum, and another crowd gathered around the place that he was staying, and he healed a man (Mark 2:1-12). Jesus, though he rose above the demands of the people, was still able to return to the same people and serve them.

The same is true for us. We can be crushed by demands and accusations. It is only a vision of the Lord that can pull us out of the despair that we feel when people place demands on us or falsely accuse us. But as we understand who the Lord is, we rally behind him, and we can return to people, even the same people who were disparaging us.

Exodus 17 is related to the previous two sections in Exodus (15:22-27, 16:1-36) by the word "grumble" (15:24; 16:2, 7, 8, 9, 12; 17:3). The people continue to grumble because they don't think they have what they need. In Exodus 17, just as in Exodus 15:22-27, they grumble because they have no water. Whereas the text emphasized the people's grumbling in 15:22-27, it emphasizes Moses' response to the grumbling in Chapter 17. The text before us, then, has implications for how we respond when people grumble against us. In placing ourselves in the text, we place ourselves in the position of Moses.

The people quarrel with Moses (17:1-7)

The Lord continues to lead the people through the wilderness, for they journeyed "according to the command of the Lord." The Lord led them to Rephidim, which turns out not to be a happy place. First, there is no water there. Second, the Israelites come under attack there (17:8). The Lord continues his seemingly strange leading, bringing the people to difficult places. He does the same with us, bringing us to difficult places so that we might learn to trust him.

In response to the first crisis, the people quarrel and tell him, "Give us water that we may drink." This is not a request but a demand. No doubt they remember the last water crisis, when Moses threw the tree into the bitter waters and they became sweet (15:25). Although Moses was the Lord's instrument in providing water before, it was still the Lord, not Moses, who made the water drinkable. Only the Lord can do something like this. Nevertheless, the people bypass the Lord and go straight to Moses. They expect him to do what only God can do. They place enormous, even completely unrealistic expectations on Moses, who is only a man. They expect him to be God.

Have you ever felt like Moses, besieged with unrealistic expectations by people who, in so many words, demand that you meet needs that only God can meet? Have you ever felt that you needed to be God? If you've

ever felt this, you know all about frustration. Our inclination in the face of expectations is to meet them. But if the expectations are unrealistic, it's impossible to meet them, and we therefore experience frustration, angst and even emotional breakdowns.

If we have failed to meet expectations and experienced the consequent frustration, we are then inclined to pull away from people - all people - because we don't want to feel the disappointment of having disappointed others. And we are then prone to interpret almost any opportunity to serve or any request as a demand that we will grudgingly attempt to meet or defiantly rebuff.

Moses, by this time, has learned to see through their grumblings to some extent. He says, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?" He accurately perceives that their problem is not with him but with the Lord. Only the Lord can provide water. And by demanding that Moses provide them water, they are testing the Lord.

The people are testing the Lord in that they have written him off as untrustworthy. To them, he is a non-factor. The scriptures encourage us to come before God with our questions, laments and complaints as we seek to gain a new perspective, as we seek to understand that he is trustworthy. But that is quite a different approach from writing God off as completely untrustworthy. That is what testing the Lord is - writing him off.

In Moses' words, we see another element involved in testing the Lord. The people's demand that Moses meet their needs ultimately represents a demand that the Lord meet their needs. This is something the Lord promises to do - he promises to meet our needs. But he does not promise to meet our perceived needs in our time (usually now) on our terms. And when we demand that he do so, we're testing the Lord. He will meet our needs, not our perceived needs, in his perfect time.

The people here approach Moses with a high degree of urgency. People who expect us to meet needs that only God can meet invariably approach us while conveying urgency. If they were trusting the Lord, there would be no sense of urgency. When someone "needs" me to do something for him or her "now," I am learning to actually not respond immediately. Invariably, the situation is not nearly so urgent, and perhaps wouldn't be urgent at all if that person were trusting the Lord. Their problem is usually with the Lord, not me. In jumping to meet needs that only God can meet, I am doing that person no favors - I am robbing him or her of the opportunity to trust the Lord.

When Moses doesn't immediately meet their demands, they accuse him of bringing them out of Egypt to kill them. This goes beyond placing demands on Moses; this is disparaging his character. They actually ascribe to him evil motives. This is an excruciating experience. It's extremely painful to listen to someone accuse you of evil motives when your heart is pure. More often we won't hear such accusations directly, because people are afraid to confront us face to face, but we'll get hints of such accusations or hear of them second-hand.

Moses, who is not only deeply hurt but senses that his life is in danger, appropriately cries out to the Lord. Moses perceives that the people will shortly stone him. He is doing exactly what he's supposed to be doing, he's following the Lord and leading the people, and yet the people still want to kill him. We can be doing exactly what we're supposed to be doing and people, even God's people, may want to kill us.

In the face of such demands and accusations, Moses asks the time-honored question, "What shall I do?" The Lord responds calmly. While Moses cried out to the Lord, the Lord simply "said" things to Moses. The Lord tells Moses to do four things: pass before the people, take some elders, take the staff and go. One commandment is conspicuous by its absence. The Lord does not say, "Give up on the people." In fact, implicit within the Lord's instructions to Moses is the command, "Don't give up on the people."

First, Moses is to "pass before the people" - he is to walk in front of them. He is still to lead them. Second, he is to take some elders with him so that they may learn from what they are about to see - so that they might learn dependence on the Lord. Third, he is to take his staff, which is actually the "staff of God" (4:20, 17:9). Whenever Moses employs his staff in the book of Exodus, it is representative of his dependence on the Lord. Fourth, with these three things in mind, he is simply to "go." The time for analysis is over; the time for action is now.

The Lord tells Moses, despite the people's demands and accusations, to continue leading them. He's probably thinking, "How in the world am I supposed to do that?"

Verse 6 erse begins with the word "behold," which usually means that the hearer is to stop and take notice of something. It's also a marker for the reader to take note as well. The Lord tells Moses that he will "stand before" him on the rock at Horeb. Moses is to know that the Lord is leading him. Perhaps he is even to see some manifestation of the Lord, inasmuch the Lord uses the word "behold." When Moses looks at the people, he sees an angry mob. If that's all he sees, there is little to hope for. But the Lord tells him there is something else to see: He can see the Lord standing before him. The Lord is telling Moses in so many words, "Yes, you see an angry mob that wants to kill you, but you look to me." The only thing that truly liberates us from the feelings of frustration and angst and despair brought on by the demands and accusations that we receive from people is a vision of the Lord - an understanding of who he is.

The Lord will stand "before" Moses, and Moses was to pass "before" the people (17:5). The Lord doesn't ask us to lead anything without being there for us, without leading us.

The Lord also tells Moses to strike the rock so that the people can drink the water that they need. Moses, under siege, wanted to know, "What shall I do to this people?" (17:4). Moses, whose heart has just been called wicked by the people, may have a list of things that he'd like to "do" to the people. But the Lord tells Moses to give them water so that they may drink. He's saying in so many words, "Even though they may want to kill you, Moses, you meet their needs."

Moses strikes the rock "in the sight of the elders," thus showing himself, as a leader, to be an example to the other leaders in how to depend on the Lord and respond to criticism.

(By the way, Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:4 finds in this rock a picture of Christ, who gives "spiritual drink." As the rock was struck, Christ was struck. As water flowed out of the rock, water flowed out of Christ. Ultimately, it was living water that flowed out Christ. His being struck on the cross provided for our eternal life.)

Moses names the place Massah, with means "trial," and Meribah, which means "quarrel," because of the people's demands and accusations. When it comes to memorializing this episode, Moses characterizes it as a witness to the people's unfaithfulness. How else could he have characterized it? He could have seen it as a glorious testimony to the faithfulness of the Lord and named the place something like "The Lord Will Provide," as Abraham named the place where the Lord provided a ram to replace Isaac as an offering. But at this point, he is not so impacted by the Lord's faithfulness as he is by the demands and accusations of the people.

Listen to this description of man named "Robert" by Dr. Allan. E. Mallinger: "It would have astonished most of his friends to know that in spite of Robert's amazing capacity for adapting to the ground rules, he felt alienated, different from the others who, he assumed, really did belong. He was extraordinarily sensitive to others' opinions of him; wherever he even suspected that someone disapproved of something he had said or done, he felt anxious and would ruminate endlessly about the episode, seeking a way to somehow explain away or undo his perceived unfortunate comment or act. Coming up with such a solution was the only thing that would quell his anxiety. On one occasion, for instance, he made a remark to a Hispanic colleague that he later thought might have sounded racist. This bothered him for days, until he finally set up a meeting with his co-worker to explain away what he had said as not really what he had meant. Ironically, the colleague didn't even remember Robert's comment, and was somewhat mystified by his elaborate rationalization." Demands and accusations, even if they are only perceived and not real, can have this kind of debilitating effect on us.

The demands and accusations waylaid Moses for the moment, but he learned from the episode and strongly leads the people in the next crisis at Rephidim.

Moses leads the people (17:8-16)

This story is seemingly unrelated to the previous story, but the narrator gives us some clues that he intends us to see them as related. First, there is no break in the narrative. Second, the narrator makes a point of mentioning the place of the episode, Rephidim, which is the same place that the last episode occurred. Just as in the last episode, the place is mentioned in the first sentence. Third, this episode follows the same narrative sequence as the previous episode. It is an example of step parallelism:

A Crisis - 17:1

B People's response - 17:2-3

C God's provision - 17:4-6

D Moses' memorial - 17:7

A' Crisis - 17:8

B' Moses' response - 17:9-10

C' God's provision - 17:11-13

D' Moses' memorial - 17:14-16

What's the point of this structure? There are at least two points, actually. First, the people's response to the crisis of water is contrasted with Moses' response to the crisis of attack. Second, Moses's response to the attack of the people is contrasted with his response to the attack of Amalek. In each case, the responses in the second section represent an improvement over the responses in the first section. The significant thing to note is that Moses grew as a leader.

The Amalekites, descendants of Essau, attacked the Israelites by picking off their "stragglers," according to a fuller account in Deuteronomy 25:17-19.

Moses earlier asked the Lord, "What shall I do to this people?" Now he doesn't even have to ask. He knows what to do: He puts them to work. He involves three men - Joshua, Aaron and Hur - and a multitude of troops. It's quite probable that the three men were among the elders that Moses took with him to the rock at Horeb. The Lord had instructed Moses to take these men with him so that they could learn dependence on the Lord, a characteristic that would be crucial in the next crisis.

Moses instructs Joshua, "Choose men for us, and go out, fight against Amalek." Moses not only trusts Joshua to choose the right men but to lead them into battle. Moses believes in Joshua. He trusts him. There are few things you can do for someone more powerful than simply believing in that person and entrusting him or her with something that you deem important. Several years ago when I was an intern at a different church two people entrusted me with two different ministries. The junior high pastor took a break for four months and gave the ministry to me, and another pastor asked me to lead a summer mission to Bulgaria. Each man believed in me and trusted me. And each act of trust impacted my confidence significantly.

Moses will station himself on the top of the hill, just as the Lord stood before him on the rock at Horeb. Moses is following the example of the Lord. When Moses was facing a crisis, he drew strength from knowing that the Lord was standing before him and believing in him as a leader of the people. Moses knows what it's like to be trusted, for the Lord has trusted him. Now Moses is going to stand before Joshua and trust him as a leader.

There is only one difference between the Lord's standing before Moses and Moses' standing before Joshua: The Lord is God, and Moses is not. So Moses takes with him "the staff of God." Moses is going to the top of the hill in dependence on the Lord. Joshua, though encouraged by Moses, is encouraged by Moses to trust the Lord.

The text doesn't tell us why Moses took Aaron and Hur with him up the hill, but he's probably thinking that

they will again have the opportunity to learn dependence on the Lord, just as they did when they saw water come from the rock. Unbeknownst to Moses, the Lord has something additional to teach him this time.

It was discovered that when Moses held up his hand, evidently the hand in which he held the staff of God, the battle went well, but when he let his hand down, the battle went poorly. Upholding the staff of God is representative of dependence on God.

But Moses's hands become weary. Evidently he held the staff in one hand and then switched hands when the other became tired. But eventually, both hands become weary. When Moses' hands grow weary, Aaron and Hur are there to help. They prop up his hands. Moses finds that he not only leads people and instructs people but that he needs people! He needs the people - even the people that were ready to stone him. Dependence on the Lord is a beautiful thing - among the most beautiful of things. But even the best leaders grow weary. It's difficult to be out there all alone, slugging it out, depending on the Lord. We need others to prop us up, so to speak, to remind us that dependence on the Lord, not ourselves, is the way to go. There are no Lone Ranger leaders or disciples. We need each other to point us to the Lord.

The result of all this is a crushing victory. Moses trusts Joshua; Moses depends on the Lord; Aaron and Hur help Moses depend on the Lord; and the people win a crushing victory. It's a beautiful picture of how the body of Christ works.

The Lord says he will "utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven" and that he will "have war against Amalek from generation to generation." The first question that comes to mind is, "Why?" Because God hates sin, which is rejection of him. The Amalekites have totally rejected the Lord, as evidenced by their sneak attack against his people. (By the way, the Amalekites were defeated in 1 Samuel 15 and destroyed in Esther 9:7-10.)

But the real lesson here is for Moses and the Israelites, and it concerns dependence on the Lord. The Lord says that "I" will blot out the Amalekites. The first clause in the Lord's sentence in verse 16 is translated, "The Lord has sworn ... " (NASB), but a more literal translation would read, "For a hand up to the throne of the Lord ... " The word "hand" has been used in the narrative of Moses' hand, which was lifted up in dependence on the Lord. So the Lord is saying, "Because you depended on me, I will wage continual war against the Amalekites." The lesson is dependence. It is the Lord who does it. In their first battle after separating themselves from the Egyptians, the Israelites need to know this.

Moses is to write the Lord's intentions to destroy Amalek in a book and recite it to Joshua. Moses is instructed to teach and invest in Joshua, a leader. It's the same thing we need to be doing in the church: teaching and investing in leaders.

As in the previous section, Moses commemorates the episode by naming something. In the previous section, he named a place. Now he names an altar. He names it "The Lord is my Banner." A banner, even now, is a standard that bears the colors by which a military unit is identified. Troops rally behind the banner. If someone is a "standard-bearer," he is carrying the colors. In parades, a marching band is often led by two people who carry the banner that identifies the band, and the musicians fall in line behind the banner. So when Moses names the altar "The Lord is my Banner," he's saying, "I rally behind the Lord; it is he I look to; it is he whom I follow."

This name is quite different from "Massah" and "Meribah," the two names he chose for the place where the Lord provided water from the rock. To Moses, that episode at the time was characterized by the people's unfaithfulness, but this episode is characterized by the Lord's faithfulness. Was the Lord less faithful in the previous episode than he was in this one? No. Has the Lord changed? Of course not. What makes this episode different so that it is commemorated by a God-oriented name instead of a man-oriented name? The difference is Moses. Moses has changed. He saw the Lord standing before him in the previous episode, and he looked to the Lord and he saw the Lord provide water. Although he gave the place a man-oriented name, he took away enough of that vision of the Lord to face the next crisis with confidence in the Lord. When he names the altar "The Lord is my Banner," he's saying, "The people may make their demands and accusations, but I will rally behind the Lord."

Seeing the Lord and rallying behind him as our banner lifts us above the demands and accusations; it frees us from their crushing effect. And amazingly enough, it also frees us to invest in those who make the demands and accusations. And as they see us rally behind the Lord, they do as well, even those who may have been griping about us earlier.

In the First Battle of Bull Run in the Civil War, Gen. Thomas Jonathan Jackson was leading the Virginia troops of the Confederacy. One man from another division saw Jackson mounted on his horse, leading his troops, and pronounced, "There stands Jackson like a stone wall! Rally behind the Virginians!" They did so, and the Confederacy won a decisive and surprising victory at the outset of the war, dashing the Union's hopes for a quick victory. And Thomas Jonathan Jackson was thereafter known as Stonewall Jackson. That day, he was the "banner" for the Confederate troops. Although shots were flying all around them, they saw Jackson, standing before them, as impregnable as a stone wall, and rallied behind him. Similarly, the Lord is our banner. Although demands and accusations may be flying all around us, we are to look to the Lord who stands before us and rally behind him.

Above the fray

If we've lived any amount of time, we've sensed the demands and accusations from others - so much so, perhaps, that we're likely to interpret almost anything as a demand or accusation. But the Lord gives us a vision of himself, in the scriptures and in our own experience, of his trustworthiness. And it is that vision that inspires us to rally to the Lord, lifting us above the demands and accusations. And from that position, above the fray, so to speak, we are free to re-enter the fray and invest in people - even the people who earlier were accusing us. Although people can be demanding and accusative, rally behind the Lord, and don't give up on them.

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