

A Sermon for Covenant

Exodus 17:1-7
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If you bear with me, I have a story to read you this morning. We've been hearing the story of the Exodus out of Egypt for the last few weeks, and we've been journeying *with* the Israelites, seeing the walls of water and the sands of the desert through *their* eyes. But today, somebody else wants to tell you the story, from his perspective. It's gonna be a little different than the way you're used to hearing it, maybe even a lot different, but if you'll humor me, perhaps you'll hear something interesting. Shall we begin?

Hi. My name is Rock. I live in the desert, and I am a rock. I suppose I got the name Rock because I am the biggest, most rock-like in all my family. I mean, we're all rocks. But I'm sort of impressive as a rock, to tell the truth. Not that any humans ever notice. But the family notices, and that's why they named me Rock. If you're wondering what our life is like, we don't see much action out here in the deserted wilderness. We do play games. "Who Can Cast the Longest Shadow" is my favorite. I'm the running champion, 58 years in a row . . . and that's about as exciting as things get. I easily could have passed my entire life obscure and unnoticed, like most rocks. We rocks aren't really looking for fame. But one day, the most exhilarating thing that has ever happened around here, happened, and it happened right here, in our pile of rocks.

*Oh, I should probably tell you that some of the humans call us Rephidim. Really we're just a pile of rocks, but somewhere along the way, a human opted to name **our** pile, and not **that** pile over there, so from then on the occasional group of nomads chooses to stop and make camp **here**, with us, because we have a nice name like Rephidim. And when campers stop here, those are like, our favorite times. Some of the groups are rowdy. Some of the groups are tired. Either way, we always enjoy the company. And oh boy, the jokes we overhear—we like to listen for the best one, and then we'll retell it for months.*

But there was this one group, and when they came, it was different. When they rolled in, they were more tired and exhausted than any group we've ever seen come through here. You'd think they'd never wandered around in a desert before. They were also exceptionally grumpy, so I doubted right away that we'd hear any good jokes before sunset. They were quarreling with one another before they even sat down. But then I heard this: "Give us water," they demanded of their leader. All us rocks perked up. Obviously, there was no water. It was a silly request, and that's what made us think that perhaps this was about to get interesting after all.

The leader, whose name was Moses, replied in a tired voice, "Why do you quarrel with me?" (Good point, I thought. What's he supposed to do about water in a place like this?) "Why do you put the Lord to the test?" he said next, in a gruff kind of voice. ("Oh! What's that supposed to mean?" I wondered.)

But before I got very far in my deciphering, the people complained again, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?" That sounded like a legitimate complaint to me, but Moses kinda rolled his eyes like he'd heard this story before.

Then Moses fell to his knees rather unexpectedly, looked towards the heavens, and cried out, "What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me!"

*I gasped and looked around. Sure enough, a few of my smaller brothers and sisters were being fingered in the hands of some rather irate-looking travelers. Can I just insert here, that no one ever asks **us** if we **want** to be weapons of death? I'll have you know, rocks are a generally peaceful community, committed to nonviolence, but no one **ever** bothers to ask our opinion before picking us up and hurling toward an opponent. Oh no, you just assume based on our hard exterior that we've got no heart.*

*Anyway, I guess God answered Moses, because no stones were thrown, and then Moses' face went kind of shiny, and his head was cocked to the side like he was listening, although I couldn't hear anything. After a few moments Moses stood up, grabbed his staff, and walked straight to me. I mean, **straight to me**. As if he **noticed** me. Not as if he **Now Meant to Sit Down**. No, he looked **at me** with purpose.*

So naturally, I looked right back, only he couldn't tell.

*But it was like he knew something about me. Then he **spoke** to me, well, whispered so the humans couldn't hear. "Look," he said. "I don't know how this is gonna work, but I've already seen what God can do. I've seen things I never would have believed before. So now, I just, I need you to do your Thing, okay? Please?"*

I had no idea what "my Thing" was, but, just in case, I tried my best to stretch my shadow farther than ever. If this was some kind of game, this was my biggest audience ever. By now, other humans were staring at me too, almost expectant.

But before I could even check the shadow length, would you believe that Moses took that staff and struck me something fierce! I was shocked! For a second, I was utterly mortified, thinking this was some kind of punishment for not performing my Thing, whatever that Thing was supposed to have been.

But then, all the sudden, I did The Thing without intending it or causing it that I know of it. Water rushed forth from me like I was a spring! A spring of water! Can you believe that? It was exhilarating and surreal all at the same time. I might have thought it was a dream, but generally rocks don't dream at all. In fact, we sleep quite peacefully. I mean, it's been reported that the rocks used for stoning have infrequent nightmares, but dreams, we're not really familiar with.

*Which meant this water shooting from me was the real deal. **I** was the conduit for a real-life, honest to God, miracle! And to think, until that moment, the most I'd ever accomplished in my long, long life was to serve as a rather unpleasant cushion for the occasional wanderer. And here, God was choosing to use me!*

I used to be called Rock. But now they call me Massah and they call the pile of rocks around me Meribah. Testing and quarrelling—that's the meaning of our new names. I don't know why they

couldn't have named me Amazing Sprout of Running Water, or something cool, but, even Massah is better than Rock.

You know, it's not just those wanderers that learned something that day. I learned that it's okay to be a rock. I mean, it took awhile for me to learn my lesson. I'll confess that—well, this is kind of embarrassing—but for months after those people moved on, I tried and tried to squeeze more water out of me. Guess how that worked?

Not.

A.

Drop.

I'd pretty much given up, until a few years later, a wandering nomad accidentally bumped me with his staff. For a split second, my hopes soared . . . maybe . . . no, not gonna happen again at all, ever.

*Gushing water had been so exciting, but I've learned that being a regular old rock is pretty cool too. A rock named Massah. I'm available, should Yahweh ever select me for something outrageous again. But for now, I serve as a memorial for the people, my existence a reminder of the faithfulness of God. I used to think my new name, Massah, was meant to remind the people of their mistakes, since Massah means testing and quarrelling and all. But then I realized that what I really remind people is that **God is faithful**. If the people hadn't quarreled, if they trusted God from the outset, then they might have tried to credit themselves for God's provisions. Kind of like, if I had thought to try and squeeze right before that water shot out of me, then I might be tempted to think I had something to do with the crazy miracle. But I was so shocked, there is no mistaking it was a God thing and not a Rock-thing. The people were so busy quarreling and testing God, they were shocked too when the water came. Believe me, I saw their faces. So there's no taking credit where credit isn't due. It was a God-thing, and not a human-thing. If they'll only just remember how they quarreled and quarreled, then they can never forget that God was compassionate and gracious. It was all God, not me, not them. It was God. God indeed was among them.*

I hope I haven't bored you by telling my side of the story. Perhaps I inspired you to be whatever it is that God has created you to be, no matter how obscure and unnoticed you may feel. Or perhaps I've reminded you of God's faithfulness, which is really my primary job, now that I'm a memorial for God's people and all. Perhaps you've seen that even if you're wandering through a desert right now, the sands could turn to pools and the rocks could burst into springs when you least expect it. Anything can happen, for the Lord is among you. I'm sure of it.

The End.