

# The Staff with Which You Struck the Nile

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## Introduction

### The Text

<sup>1</sup>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. <sup>2</sup>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?" <sup>3</sup>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?" <sup>4</sup>So Moses cried to the Lord, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." <sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>And he 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?" (Ex 17:1–7)

### Why Exodus?

- A. As I was preparing my message last time on the Good Samaritan, I ended up seeing something here in this text in Exodus that captivated me. You might recall what we looked at last week, how the Lawyer in that text "stood up to put [Jesus] to the test" (Luke 10:25).
  - 1. Well, as I was tracing through the Scriptures that idea of putting God to the test, I came to this text here in Ex 17. And as I was skimming it over, something there in v. 5 jumped out at me, something I'd never noticed before. In response to the people of Israel testing Him, God tells Moses to grab his staff, but not just his staff, He qualifies it with these words: "the staff with which you struck the Nile . . ."
    - a. That is an amazing qualification. That's why I titled this sermon what I did. That's what initially drew me to this text. That's something I'll explain a bit later when we get to it.

### Hi-Level Summary

- A. Before we get rolling here, since we are just kind of dropping into the book of Exodus, allow me to quickly give a hi-level summary of what has happened in the book thus far.
  - 1. Since Joseph, the people of Israel had grown in Egypt, so much so that the Egyptians started seeing them as a threat. So Pharaoh decides it's time to enslave them—make sure they know their place.
  - 2. After some 430 years of being in Egypt, the people cry out to God and He hears them.

3. He shows up to Moses on mount Horeb (which will feature again in our text), also known as Mount Sinai, and Moses is commissioned to lead God’s people out of bondage to a place that God has prepared for them, the land of Canaan, which comes to be known as the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey.
  4. To bring Israel out of Egypt, YHWH uses Moses to bring plagues upon the Egyptians there—ten in fact, culminating in the death of their firstborn sons.
  5. Then God brings them through the Red Sea, where He parts the waters—Israel walks through, the Egyptians chase after and the waters close upon them.
  6. Now, after some celebrating, the people soon realize that they are not yet in the Promised Land but, rather, in the wilderness. They grumble about a lack of water, so God miraculously provides (Ex 15:22-25). They grumble about a lack of food, so God miraculously provides (Ex 16 [which really takes us right up to the fringes of our text here in Ex 17]).
- B. A few weeks, perhaps as much as a couple of months (cf. Ex 19:1), have gone by to this point and here we see, yet again, the people are in the wilderness grumbling about a lack of water.
1. Three things we’re going to look at this morning: (1) A Wilderness Grumbling; (2) A Striking Provision; and (3) An Unspeakable Privilege.

## (1) A Wilderness Grumbling

### Three Questions

A. Under this first heading, there are really three questions I want to ask:

#### (1) What Exactly Is the Wilderness?

- A. Have you ever played one of those word-association games? Well, when I say “wilderness”, what do you think of? What associations do you make?
1. For me, I’m immediately thinking of adventure and exploration, of camping and hiking, of compasses and pocketknives. I think of this movie we used to watch back when I was a kid: The Adventures of the Wilderness Family. Where, if I remember right, they pull away from the congestion and stress of city-life to live in the wilderness and find true love and joy again.
    - a. In other words, to me, the wilderness sounds kind of nice. It’s where I go to sabbath. The best summer of my life was spent backpacking through the wilderness of the Rocky Mountains. I love it.
- B. But when the Bible talks about wilderness, it’s talking about something much different. The way I just spoke of the wilderness is how Israel would speak of the Promised Land. “I can’t wait to get there. I’m going to find my peace, my joy, my rest there.”
1. The wilderness for them is actually what stands in the way of such things for them. It is the place of trial, of hardship, of deficiency, of little water and little food and little comfort. It’s

the desert. It's the place that exists between Egypt and Canaan, between the house of slavery and the Land of Promise.

C. Now, we need to unmask this biblical idea for a moment. I think those of us sitting in our padded chairs, in a building cooled by air conditioning, with smart phones in our pockets, and all the modern comforts at our disposal, might be prone to think surely we're not in the wilderness.

1. But what we need to understand is that what for Israel was a literal wilderness, for the people of God now is more spiritually understood. In fact, in the OT what we really have is the whole of redemptive history in miniature. In the OT God gives us a tangible picture of what in the NT takes on more spiritual dimensionality.

a. Israel is freed from slavery to Pharaoh, is led through the wilderness, to the Promised Land and Jerusalem. We, God's New Covenant people in Christ, have been freed from slavery to Satan, sin, and death, and we are headed toward the Promised Land of the new heavens and new earth, and the new Jerusalem. And the time in between is our wilderness sojourn.

1. What this means is that our entire earthly existence is understood, biblically speaking, as a pilgrimage through the wilderness. That's why Peter would say we are "exiles" (1 Pet 1:1) on the earth—pilgrims, refugees, living out our days, passing through a place that is not our home.

D. This means, therefore, that the wilderness is all around you, that the wilderness confronts you even in your padded chairs, even with A/C turned up, even with your smart-phone, modern-comfort life. It's not out there somewhere. It's right here. And you're in it. In one way or another, you're in it.

1. And it's not just that you're in it simply when "serious" trials strike—like I get cancer, my mom dies, or I lose my job and now we're going to lose our house. It's in the normal everyday stuff too.

a. It's doing dishes after long day when your feet are aching and your head is throbbing and all you want to do is sprawl out and binge-watch some Netflix or whatever.

b. It's a traffic jam on the 87 as you're making your way home from work.

c. For my wife and I these days, the wilderness has been coming for us in the middle of the night, usually somewhere around 3:00am, when Bella comes in saying she's peed the bed . . . again. Why? This girl's been out of diapers for like a year or two now. Why all of a sudden are we peeing our bed something like 2-3 nights a week? I didn't sign up for this.

E. I wonder: Where is the wilderness showing up for you? You're in it. Where is it?

## (2) What Is God up to in the Wilderness?

A. Now, listen to me, the wilderness isn't fun, it doesn't feel good, but on the authority of God's word we can say without even a shade of doubt: God does some of His best work in the wilderness.

- B. This really brings me to my second question here: What Is God up to in the Wilderness?
1. The question assumes that God is leading us into it for a purpose. And this idea stands on the face of our text even this morning: “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” (v. 1).
    - a. It was according to God’s command that they move deeper into the wilderness and head for a place with no water for them to drink. He leads them there. Why? To do some of His best work.
- C. We could probably boil what this involves down to two fundamental things: (1) to test; and (2) to teach. It’s in the wilderness that He both exposes our hearts and works to really repair and heal them.
1. When God brings us into the wilderness, truly He is bringing us into circumstances we clearly cannot manage on our own resources. There’s no water. What am I supposed to do about that? I’m helpless here.
    - a. Now, truth be told, there really is no circumstance that we can actually manage on our own resources, but we often don’t see this reality until God brings us into the wilderness, the desert.
- D. You usually think, in the desert, that’s where you see mirages, right? You don’t see quite right. There’s palm trees and a spring off in the distance, no there’s not, just more sand. It’s a mirage.
1. But God says it’s the other way around. When you are living in luxury, when you have all your stuff, and your life is going to plan, you live within this mirage that you are in control and are managing just fine. You don’t see that it is God who is upholding you in these good times as well.
    - a. That’s why God would warn Israel through Moses just before they were entering the Promised Land: “<sup>11</sup> Take care lest you forget the Lord your God . . . <sup>12</sup> lest, when you have eaten and are full and have built good houses and live in them, <sup>13</sup> and when your herds and flocks multiply and your silver and gold is multiplied, <sup>14</sup> then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, <sup>15</sup> who led you through the great and terrifying wilderness, with its fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty ground where there was no water, who brought you water out of the flinty rock, <sup>16</sup> who fed you in the wilderness with manna that your fathers did not know, that he might humble you and test you, to do you good in the end. <sup>17</sup> Beware lest you say in your heart, ‘My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth’” (Deut 8:11–17). “Don’t go back to the mirage. I do some of My best work in the wilderness. Don’t forget it now that you’re in a place of luxury.”
- E. You see, God actually takes us into the wilderness, the desert, so we can see clearly once more. He takes us into the wilderness to dissipate the mirage of self-sufficiency and bring us into full-hearted relationship with Him again.

F. I wonder: What's God exposing in you? What's He testing and teaching you right now in the wilderness you're facing? He's doing some of His best work in those tough spots.

### (3) How Do We Often Respond in the Wilderness?

A. Once we catch a vision for all that God is up to in the wilderness, you would think we might come to respond more favorably to it. But what we see with Israel time and again is so often true of ourselves. We respond not with faith and trust . . . but with grumbling.

1. <sup>1b</sup> [T]here was no water for the people to drink. <sup>2a</sup> Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink" (vv. 1b-2a).
2. "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?'" (v. 3).
3. In v. 4 we're told that their grumbling was giving way to violence. Moses cries to the Lord: "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me."
  - a. We might be inclined to think that Israel's grumbling is merely against Moses himself, but v. 7 clears the air, and takes us really to the bottom issue in all of this: "[T]hey tested the Lord by saying, 'Is the Lord among us or not?'"

B. Let us be clear: Every grumble is an argument with the Almighty. Every grumble is an audacious attack on the way in which God is running the universe. Every grumble is a toddler trying to tell her daddy how to parent. Every grumble says, in essence, "If I were on the throne, I would do better."

1. A little grumble here or there feels like such a small thing, right? This is not a small thing. It may feel small to grumble when Subway forgets that you asked for pepperoncinis on your sandwich. But this is a wilderness moment here. God is turning up the heat to see what's in your heart and to bring healing.

C. Now allow me to offer my sense as to why this is so often the case—why do we grumble?

1. When the gap between my expectations and reality isn't closed by faith, grumbling quickly rises to fill the void. Or to put it another way: When the gap between my will and God's will (what I want God to be doing in my life and what He's actually doing in my life) isn't closed by faith, grumbling quickly rises to fill the void.
  - a. Did you catch that? This is important. Here's my expectations of what God will do. Here's my reality as of now. Here's my will for my life. Here's God's will for my life. Here's what I want God to be doing. Here's what He's actually doing. The two aren't lining up. I'm not seeing it. Things are taking a lot longer than I thought. My timeline isn't mapping onto His. There's this growing gap between the two.

D. So how am I going to respond? As far as I can see, at bottom, we really only have two options at this point:

1. You can either, turn to God in faith. “I have seen time and again, in Scripture, in my life, and preeminently at the cross of Christ, how you take what seems hard and bad and turn it for good. I trust You.”
2. Or you can throw God on trial, question Him, test Him, saying, perhaps with your lips, perhaps only in your heart: “[Is the Lord among us or not?](#)” (v. 7b).

## (2) A Striking Provision

### 3 Observations

- A. Now such words invite, even deserve, God’s swift and holy judgment. How could those who had seen all that Israel had seen up to this point say such things to Him? The wilderness has exposed our hearts and it is not a pretty thing. So what is God to do?
- B. Well we find, again, that God brings us out in the wilderness to expose our hearts not so that He can shame us, condemn us, or kill us, but so that He can heal us, and teach us something of His mercy and love.
  1. This is what we find in the direction He now gives to Moses: “<sup>5</sup> [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. <sup>6</sup> 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’”](#) (vv. 5-6).
- C. Now there are three quick observations I want to bring out at this point . . .

#### (1) What Is Moses to Do?

- A. In a word: strike—“[\[Y\]ou shall strike . . .](#)” (v. 6b).
- B. This word “[strike](#)” [nakhah] is a word of aggression, of violence, of judgment. It’s been used many times before this point in the book of Exodus to describe what God was doing with the plagues in Egypt: “[I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all the wonders that I will do in it . . .](#)” (Ex 3:20).

#### (2) What Is Moses to Strike?

- A. In a word: the rock—“[\[Y\]ou shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it](#)” (v. 6b).
- B. This rock which Moses is to strike is further spoken of there at the beginning of v. 6: “[Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb . . .](#)” Now Horeb, as I said in passing earlier, is another name for Sinai. In Ex 3:1 it is called “[the mountain of God.](#)” And for good reason. It’s the place where God first appeared to Moses in a burning bush. And it’s the place where God is now leading Israel to give them the law.
  1. But it is here now in our text also shown to be the place that Moses is supposed to strike. That’s going to be significant.

### (3) What Is Moses to Strike the Rock With?

- A. In a word: the staff—“take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go” (v. 5b).
- B. Though the staff God refers to was used in one way or another to strike Egypt with the ten various plagues of judgment, one instance in particular is foregrounded here—the time when Moses takes the staff and strikes the Nile, the life-source in many ways for Egypt, turning the water to blood and all the life within it to death.
  - 1. Why? As I said, this is really the thing that caught my eye here. I mean, the major watershed moment in Israel’s history was the Exodus and the parting of the Red Sea. The staff was used for that too. The striking of the Nile, the first plague, even the magicians of Egypt were said in some way to have been able to mimic it.
    - a. Why: “the staff with which you struck the Nile”? Why not: “the staff with which you parted the Red Sea”?! That’s how I would’ve said it. That’s the event God almost always references when He recalls Israel’s time in Egypt. What is God trying to get at here?

### All Shadows of Christ

- A. Well, on way to answering this question, let me show you a most wonderful thing. All of this stuff we have just looked at, in one way or another, is all preparing us to see the work of Jesus on the cross.
  - 1. He is God’s gracious provision for grumbling people. He is the way of healing and life even in the midst of the wilderness. Let me show you.
- B. With regard to the first observation, that Moses is called to strike. Well, this is the very same word in the Hebrew used to describe what shall befall the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, which we know now clearly refers to Jesus.
  - 1. “I gave my back to those who strike, and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard; I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting” (Is 50:6).
  - 2. “<sup>4</sup> Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. <sup>5</sup> But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed” (Is 53:4–5).
    - a. We esteemed Him smitten, “struck” by God. And I suppose He was but not in the way we thought. Jesus was struck by God not for His own sin and guilt but for ours!
- C. With regard to the second observation, that Moses is called to strike the rock, mount Horeb, mount Sinai, the mount of God, well Paul leaves little doubt as to how we should interpret this: “<sup>1</sup> [O]ur fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, <sup>2</sup> and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, <sup>3</sup> and all ate the same spiritual food, <sup>4</sup> and all drank the same spiritual

drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ” (1 Cor 10:1–4).

1. Isn't this amazing?! God's reflex is to strike, not His people, but Himself! To take our pain, to suffer for our wrongdoings.

a. I'm thinking of the doctor's office, when they tap your kneecap with that mallet thing to test your reflexes. Your leg kind of spasms out right? Well, when you hit God, what is His reflex? It's not to hit back. It's to hit Himself. To let Himself be struck in our place.

1. Surely that was implied by the fact that this was His mountain, and He says He Himself is standing there, presumably in the pillar of cloud or fire, and Moses is to strike into that!

(1) But Paul makes such an inference crystal clear. God is asking Moses to give Israel a picture of how He will strike His Son for us on the cross.

D. And finally now, with regard to that third observation, that Moses is to do all of this with the staff that struck the Nile, what are we to make of that?

1. Well, I think it's the connection between the strike of judgment, the blood, and the water. When you bring this whole constellation of ideas together and lay them over our text with all its shadows of Christ, what comes into view is this idea that striking Jesus in judgment on that cross will bring blood and death for him, but it will be the source of our water and life.

a. When Moses strikes the Nile, blood. When Moses strikes the rock (which was Christ), water. Implication: Jesus takes the strike of God's judgment, shedding His blood on our account. But His blood becomes for us water in the wilderness, living water, the mercy of God come to satisfy and sustain.

1. Because He was stricken of God, killed for our grumbling, for our rebellion, for our sin . . . we live!

E. Perhaps this is the reason John includes that strange detail in his recording of Jesus' death on the cross: “[O]ne of the soldiers [presumably to confirm that Jesus was in fact dead] pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water” (John 19:34). There's this strange mingling of the two for us.

1. Jesus said it even more plainly earlier in John's gospel: “Whoever . . . drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:54).

### (3) An Unspeakable Privilege

A. Now fast forward nearly 40 years (Num 20). Israel is still in the wilderness. They're still thirsty. And they're still grumbling. “Where's the water?” And God tells Moses now, “Okay, water's still going to



come from the rock, only now, it doesn't need to be struck anymore, just speak to it, and water will flow."

- B. We shall not go into all the ins and outs of this scene, with Moses disobedience and whatever else. Let's just end with a focus on this stunning reality: The rock has already been struck. Now all we need to do is speak.
  - 1. Christ, has already made an offering for our sin, our grumblings, our breaches of faith. No more atonement is necessary. No payback is required. All that God asks is that you come and speak. And the living water of His grace will flow. Even in the midst of the wilderness.
- C. So I don't know how the wilderness has been manifesting itself in your life lately, but two things I do know:
  - 1. I know it is in some way—that there is a gap between your expectations and reality, and your faith is being tested.
  - 2. But I also know that Jesus is here in the wilderness with you, and He is ready and happy to meet you in this place with mercy, and His spirit, and living water. Speak to Him now!