

THE TYRANNY OF EXPECTATIONS

SERIES: EXODUS - JOURNEY TO FREEDOM



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Exodus 18

“You can please some of the people all of the time, you can please all of the people some of the time, but you can’t please all of the people all of the time.”

The quote, attributed to the poet John Lydgate and later adapted by Abraham Lincoln, rings true. You’re going to disappoint some people because you can’t please all the people all the time.

You will fail to meet expectations. Especially, you will fail to meet the unrealistic expectations. Moreover, some of the people you can’t please will be more than happy to let you know about your failure to meet their expectations.

A few of us, for whatever reason, care little what other people think. Most of us, however, are not immune to expectations. Some of us, in fact, are tyrannized by them.

Listen to this description of man named Robert by renowned psychiatrist 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; whenever 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 it 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 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.¹

Expectations, even if they are based on perception and not reality, can have this kind of effect on us. What can we do to be free? We need a vision of God. Today we’re going to get one.

No water to drink

Exodus 17:1-2a:

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. 2 Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, “Give us water to drink.”

There’s a problem: there’s no water in Rephidim.

Earlier, when the people of Israel set out from the Red Sea, they found no water in the wilderness of Shur, and when they came to Marah, the water there was bitter. The people blamed Moses back then, but the Lord made the bitter water sweet when Moses threw a log into it, and then they came to Elim, where twelve springs bubbled up from the earth.

When they set out from Elim, the people again blamed Moses because they had no food. However, the Lord came through again, providing mana in the morning and quail in the evening.

Now, again, the people have no water. Should they have stayed where they were, or did they take a wrong turn somewhere? No. They traveled “according to the commandment of the Lord,” apparently by the pillars of cloud and fire (Exodus 13:21-22).

Who’s to blame? Clearly, the Lord is responsible for leading them to Rephidim, but the people blame Moses again. This is becoming a pattern.

It’s quite possible to be completely obedient to the Lord and end up in a place of deprivation, forcing you to trust the Lord.

Quarreling and testing

Exodus 17:2b-4:

And Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?”
3 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?”
4 So Moses cried to the Lord, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.”

Moses, rightly perceiving that the people's problem is not with him but with the Lord, asks them two questions that begin with the word “why.” The people, however, don't answer Moses' questions but instead ask him a question that begins with the word “why.” Their question is actually an accusation. The people accuse Moses of evil motives: bringing them out of Egypt to kill them.

Why do they quarrel with Moses? Because Moses is a lightning rod for their anger. It's easier for them to blame someone they can see, Moses, than the Lord, whom they can't see, even if they can see evidence of him in the two pillars and even if they have experienced his goodness and power in multiple ways both in Egypt and in the wilderness.

Moses responds by asking another question, this time not of the people but of the Lord. In fact, he cries a question to the Lord: “What shall I do with this people?” Whereas the people accused Moses of bringing them out of Egypt to kill them, Moses perceives that the people are on the verge of killing him.

Moses wants an answer from the Lord, and he wants it quick.

Take your staff and go

Exodus 17:5:

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.”

What should Moses do with the people who are blaming him and almost ready to kill him? The Lord's response to Moses amounts to this: “Lead them.”

Don't give up on the people. Instead, lead them. Despite their grumblings, the Lord hasn't given up on them; Moses shouldn't give up on them either.

In so many words, the Lord tells Moses: “Pass on before the people, as a leader. Pass on before them so that they can see you. Take some elders, other leaders, so that they too can learn to lead. Take in your hand the staff, which represents dependence on me (Exodus 4:20, 17:9). The people have seen me in action when you struck the Nile with it. Let everyone, people and elders alike, see you depend on me so that they may learn to depend on me. Do these three things and go.”

Go where? Do what?

Strike the rock

Exodus 17:6:

“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.

“Behold.” Before he does anything else, Moses must “behold.” Behold what?

Behold the Lord standing before him on the rock at Horeb, where the Lord first appeared to Moses in the burning bush (Exodus 3). As Moses passes on “before” the people, the Lord will stand “before” Moses. If the people follow Moses as he follows the Lord, then they'll be following the Lord.

What will Moses see? Evidently, some sort of manifestation of the presence of the Lord, perhaps the pillar of cloud. When Moses looks at the people, he sees an angry mob. Especially with an angry mob breathing down his neck, he needs to look to the Lord, not the people.

Earlier, Moses threw a log into bitter waters. This time, there are no waters. The need is the same, but the environment is different, even more forbidding. The Lord meets the need in a different way.

Moses, following the instructions of the Lord, goes to the rock at Horeb, strikes it with his staff, and water emerges. The Lord thereby provides water for the people, who tested him and quarreled with his leader. Earlier, he turned bitter water into sweet water; now he turns a rock into a fountain.

The apostle 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, living water that flowed from Christ.

You’re not God

It is possible to have empathy for people who have expectations for you, because God has created all of us with needs and desires and because those needs and desires, from our perspective, often go unmet. You know what it’s like to need and want, and you know what it’s like to feel that your needs and wants are unmet.

You probably also know what it’s like to blame people because they haven’t met your expectations. Perhaps you’re caught up even now in blaming someone or some people. So, when people blame you because you haven’t met their expectations, have a little empathy.

However, if God is responsible for creating people with needs and desires, then he is responsible for meeting them or not meeting them. The usual human response, though, is not to blame God, whom we can’t see, but to blame people, whom we can see. Sooner or later, you will be a lightning rod for people’s anger.

You may even be accused, as Moses was, of evil motives. On a few occasions, people not only made me aware that I was not meeting their expectations, they also accused me of evil motives. They assumed that they could see into my heart and know why I was doing what I was doing. Much of the time I don’t even know why I’m doing what I’m doing!

Some people, angry because others don’t meet their expectations, try to get what they want through guilt. Beware of people who approach you with a high degree of urgency. Especially beware of anyone who begins a sentence with the words, “If you really loved me, you would . . .”

The first thing you need to do to free yourself from the tyranny of expectations is to recognize that you’re not God. You already knew that, of course, but are you acting on it? People need to learn to depend on God, not you. If you keep trying to meet their expectations, you keep them from depending on God. Leave room for them to depend on God. And cut yourself some slack for not being God!

How will Moses remember Rephidim?

Two names for the place

Exodus 17:7:

And he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the quarreling of the people of Israel, and because they tested the Lord by saying, “Is the Lord among us or not?”

Moses gives names to the place that mean “Testing” and “Quarreling,” respectively. We now find out that the people tested the Lord by questioning whether he was faithful to his promise to be with them (Exodus 3:12).

When it comes to commemorating the episode, Moses characterizes it as a witness to the people’s unfaithfulness. On the one hand, indeed, the people quarreled with Moses and tested the Lord. On the other hand, how else could Moses have commemorated the episode? Instead of commemorating the unfaithfulness of the people, he could have commemorated the faithfulness of the Lord.

“Many are the afflictions of the righteous,” David says in the Psalms. How will we remember them? Will we remember the afflictions for how people failed us?

Scarcely has one problem in Rephidim been solved when another one emerges.

Amalek attacks

Exodus 17:8-10:

Then Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim. 9 So Moses said to Joshua, “Choose for us men, and go out and fight with Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand.” 10 So Joshua did as Moses told him, and fought with Amalek, while Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill.

At first glance, the story in Exodus 17:8-16 may seem unrelated to the previous story. However, 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.²

In Exodus 17:1, there was a problem: there was no water in Rephidim. The Lord solved the problem by providing water from the rock at Horeb. Now there's another problem in Rephidim: the Amalekites, descendants of Esau, attack. The Israelites are descendants of Jacob, Esau's brother. The Lord has led his people to a place that poses immense challenges.

It's quite possible to be completely obedient to the Lord and to end up in a place where you're attacked, forcing you to trust the Lord.

If the people have any inclination to blame Moses again, they lack opportunity to do so while under attack. The time has come for Israel to learn how to fight. Exodus 17 marks a transition from the Lord's fighting for Israel to the Lord's fighting through Israel. Not having to contend with the people's complaints, Moses springs into action. "He appears more composed against an attacking army than when he was mobbed by his own people."³

Having learned from the Lord's instructions in the prior episode, Moses knows what to do: he involves other leaders. He commissions Joshua to both lead the campaign and choose warriors. Instead of crying out to the Lord, "What shall I do with this people?" Moses knows what to do with them: he calls them to arms.

Moses' part will be to stand on the top of the hill. Again, Moses builds off the Lord's instructions in the prior episode. Moses saw the Lord "stand" on the rock at Horeb. Now Moses will "stand" on the top of the hill so that the people can see him.

Is Moses equating himself with the Lord? Far from it, because he brings with him his staff, now identified as "the staff of God," just as he brought it with him on his way to the rock of Horeb. The people will see Moses depend on the Lord and, seeing him, they will be encouraged to do the same.

In the earlier episode, Moses struck the rock and water came out. What, pray tell, will he do with the staff this time?

After commissioning Joshua, Moses takes two other leaders, Aaron and Hur, with him to the top of the hill.

Weary hands

Exodus 17:11-13:

Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed, and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed. 12 But 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. 13 And Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the sword.

Only when Moses holds up the staff in his hand, in dependence on the Lord, does Israel prevail. The narrator leaves us with the impression that when one hand becomes tired, Moses switches to the other hand. But eventually, both hands grow weary.

Moses didn't need any help when he struck the rock with the staff. He needs help this time, however. Aaron and Hur, who have also learned from the previous episode, are there to provide it, and they know what to do. They give Moses a stone for a chair, and they hold up his hands. Because of Aaron and Hur, Moses' "weary" hands become "steady" hands.

The result? Israel wins a crushing victory. Everyone contributes: Joshua leads the battle, Moses depends on the Lord, Aaron and Hur help Moses depend on the Lord, and the people fight in dependence on the Lord. Everyone contributes, and Israel wins because the Lord fights through them.

And Moses learns that he needs the people, even the people who were on the verge of killing him.

Depend on God

The first thing you need to do to free yourself from the tyranny of expectations is to recognize that you're not God. The second thing you need to do is to depend on God.

The staff, which appears in both episodes in Exodus 17, represents dependence on God. Moses must depend on God in part one of the story and in part two of the story. We must depend on God in all parts of our story. When we depend on God, we prevail, as Moses prevailed, and others prevail also as they are encouraged to depend on the Lord, as the Israelites were encouraged.

“We’re all ordinary people,” G.K. Chesterton said, “And it’s the extraordinary people who know it.”⁴ Do you want to be extraordinary? Depend on the Lord.

We can, at times, cry out to the Lord in dependence on him, as Moses did. There may also come times when we need the help of others to depend on the Lord, as Moses needed the help of Aaron and Hur when his arms grew weary.

When my mother was dying, I was too anguished to even pray. Others knew this and prayed for me. I’ve never seen so many answered prayers in my life.

How will Moses remember the battle with Amalek?

A name for an altar

Exodus 17:14-16:

Then 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.” 15 And Moses built an altar and called the name of it, The Lord Is My Banner, 16 saying, “A hand upon the throne of the Lord! The Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation.”

Why does the Lord promise to war against Amalek and to blot out its memory? Because he sees the Amalekites as exceedingly evil. Amalek attacked God’s nascent people unprovoked. According to the fuller account in Deuteronomy 25:17-19, the Amalekites attacked Israel by picking off stragglers and had no fear of God. The Amalekites were defeated in 1 Samuel 15 and destroyed in Esther 9:7-10.

As in the previous section, Moses commemorates the episode by naming something. In the previous episode, 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.

When Moses names the altar, he’s saying, “I must rally behind the Lord. I must look to him. I must follow him.” Indeed, a hand, Moses’ hand, in which he held the staff of God, was lifted to the throne of the Lord, in dependence on him.

The name “The Lord Is My Banner” is quite different from “Massah” and “Meribah,” the two names Moses chose for the place where the Lord provided water from the rock. To Moses, that episode 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? No. What makes this episode different so that Moses commemorates it with a God-oriented name instead of a human-oriented name? The difference is Moses. Moses has changed.

In the previous episode, Moses saw the Lord standing before him, and the Lord provided water. Although Moses gave the place a human-oriented name, he took away enough of that vision of the Lord to face the next crisis with confidence in the Lord. Therefore, he gives the altar a God-oriented name.

Earlier, the people asked, “Is the Lord among us or not?” Now the answer is etched in stone.

“Many are the afflictions of the righteous,” says David in the Psalms. How will we remember them? For how people failed us or for how the Lord delivered us? “Many are the afflictions of the righteous / but the Lord delivers him out of them all” (Psalm 34:19).

Get a vision of God

First, you’re not God. Second, depend on God. Finally, and most importantly, to free yourself from the tyranny of expectations, get a vision of God. In the first crisis, the Lord told Moses, “Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb.” Moses took away enough of that vision of the Lord to face the next crisis with confidence in the Lord.

In the face of expectations, look to God, not to people, especially people who are disappointed in you. Exodus 17, as we follow it into the gospels, gives us the vision of God we need to transcend expectations. Specifically, it gives us a vision of God the Son.

On the top of the hill

At Rephidim, Moses stood on the top of the hill. At Golgotha, Jesus was crucified at the top of the hill.

When Jesus was crucified, who was there to put a stone under him? No one. Who was there to hold up his hands? No one. If Jesus looked to one side and then the other, he would not have seen Aaron and Hur. No, he would have seen two criminals, one on his right and one on his left, who could not have helped him even if they wanted to, because each of them was nailed to a cross.

And lest anyone assume that it was the nails that supported Jesus' body and held up his hands, remember, he could have appealed to his Father, who would have sent more than twelve legions of angels (Matthew 26:53).

The passersby taunted him: "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." The priests, the scribes, and the elders taunted him: "He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him." Even the criminals on either side of him taunted him in the same way (Matthew 27:39-44).

His countrymen all found in Jesus a lightning rod for their anger. In their view, he could not have been the Messiah because he did not fulfill their expectations. To them, the suggestion that he come down from the cross was a joke. To Jesus, it was as real as the nails in his hands.

The taunt of his countrymen echoed words of the devil, who earlier met Jesus in the wilderness and said, "If you are the Son of God . . ." If you are the Son of God, the devil said, then fulfill messianic expectations (Matthew 4:1-11). If Jesus came down from the cross and fulfilled such expectations, he would have been the Messiah the people wanted but not the Messiah they needed.

So, Jesus appealed to the Father. But he did not appeal to the Father to send legions of angels. Instead, Jesus appealed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

What supported his body and held up his hands? What kept him on the cross? It wasn't the nails. It was love—even for those who taunted him and tortured him and killed him. And, yes, it was love for you.

Jesus stayed on the cross, transcending expectations, to be the Messiah they needed, not the Messiah they wanted—to be the Savior we needed, not the Savior we wanted. If Moses' hands were steady until "the going down of the sun," Jesus' hands were steady until "the sun's light failed" (Luke 23:45).

That's the vision of God we need to free ourselves from the tyranny of expectations: the vision of Jesus on the top of the hill, hands lifted, held to cross by love, steady until the sun's last light.

Get that vision in your mind, and you might even be able to love your enemies.

Endnotes

1. Allan E. Mallinger, *Too Perfect: When Being in Control Gets Out of Control* (New York: Random House Publishing Group, New York, 1992).
2. Literary structure:
 - A Crisis in Rephidim: no water (Exodus 17:1)
 - B People's response (Exodus 17:2-3)
 - C God's provision: water (Exodus 17:4-6)
 - D Moses' memorial (Exodus 17:7)
 - A' Crisis in Rephidim: Amalek attacks (Exodus 17:8)
 - B' Moses' response (Exodus 17:9-10)
 - C' God's provision: victory (Exodus 17:11-13)
 - D' Moses' memorial (Exodus 17:14-16)
3. Brian Morgan, "Perfecting Our Hand in Battle" (Cupertino, CA: Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino, May 22, 2005).
4. G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995).