

God's Provision and Protection

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[0 : 00] Well, depending on how you count, it's been 36 days since our church went online and 34 days since our state officially went into lockdown.

It feels a lot longer than that, doesn't it? It seems also to have added to life's struggles, hasn't it? From the less serious, like us parents feeling guilty about how much screen time our kids are having.

Although one solution I saw on the next slide says, if you're feeling guilty about the kids watching too much TV, just mute it, put on the subtitles and boom, now they're reading, educational. I actually like that, I might try that one. Or there's also the struggle of working from home, like on the next slide, for those who have pets climbing all over them.

And if it's not the pet climbing all over you, then on the next slide, it's the kids climbing all over you. Of course, there are more serious struggles than that, aren't there?

[1 : 02] For some, it's the intensity of living with the same people day in, day out, not knowing when they'll ever get a chance to get rid of them.

And that's just my family. Or for others, it's the isolation, which is actually quite difficult and not knowing when it will actually end. For some, it's the loss of work or income and not knowing if they yet qualify for JobKeeper.

And for most of us, with this talk of restrictions being relaxed, perhaps on the 11th of May, we don't know. It's not knowing which ones will be relaxed and what our life will then look like for the rest of the year.

Nor what will happen to all those things we had planned. Whether school or uni or work or even weddings or travel. And perhaps the thing that's made all these struggles harder is that we can't be with each other physically.

To support one another more effectively than Zoom. I heard a new term tonight from Sandra. I think she said Zoomsters. Anyway, Zoomers.

[2 : 16] Anyway, I don't know if that's a thing. But we used to say safety in numbers, but not with Corona, is it? Well, today Israel faced two big struggles in life after leaving Egypt in our chapter tonight.

And you might remember they'd left the safe from Egypt, from slavery in Egypt. They're on their way to their promised land. Similarly, we've been saved from slavery to sin and on our way to our promised land of the new creation.

Though first, Israel had to journey to Sinai, where God would formally make this nation his people and he their God. Just as he promised Abraham.

So on the next slide, the book is broadly broken up into, say, from Egypt. Well, you can see it on your screens for yourself. Each phase is about God establishing them as his people and he their God.

And so our chapter tonight is still in the journeying with God section. And on their journey, the two big struggles they face are no water and an attacking army.

[3 : 22] But God teaches them that they're actually not alone in life. For he is with them firstly to provide, which is point one on the slide.

Have a look there in your Bibles. Verse one. The whole Israelite community set out from the desert of sin, traveling from place to place as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink.

So they quarreled with Moses and said, give us water to drink. Moses replied, why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the Lord to the test? But the people were thirsty for water there and they grumbled against Moses.

They said, why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and our livestock die of thirst? Then Moses cried out to the Lord, what am I to do with these people?

They are almost ready to stone me. So here is another account of them grumbling about water. As Mark mentioned last week, this really belongs to the first two grumbling episodes because it follows the same pattern and actually forms a sandwich.

[4 : 38] So on the next slide, you can kind of see it there. Chapter 15 was grumbling about water, then food and then water again. And so the first half of this chapter really belongs to last week.

But I think Mark was worried I wouldn't have enough to preach on, forgetting that my problem is not preaching too short. So, you know, get comfortable, guys. Grab the popcorn.

But there are actually some differences to this account here today. For example, they don't just grumble, but verse two, they now also quarrel.

And this is stronger than grumbling. It actually carries with it the idea of presenting a formal charge against Moses. And the charge, verse three, is that Moses is trying to kill them.

And so verse four, they are now ready to kill him. That's new. And so we see this escalation of grumbling through these three episodes of last week and this week.

[5 : 38] But the other new feature is that the previous two episodes were about God testing them. But here tonight, verse two, they are testing God.

Of course, they tried to hide this by quarreling with Moses and demanding he give them water. But by demanding water from Moses now, they are actually testing God and doubting his presence with them to provide.

I just skip down to verse seven for a moment and have a look there. Moses called that place Massah, which means testing. And Meribah, which means quarreling, because the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the Lord, saying, is the Lord among us or not?

Is he with us? You see, they doubted God was present with them to provide, which is an extraordinary thing to do when you think about it, isn't it? I think Mark pointed this out rightly last week.

It's only been two months since they saw God save them through the Red Sea in chapter 14. And less than that, since they saw God provide water for them in chapter 15. And even less than that, since they saw God provide food for them in chapter 16.

[6 : 59] In fact, their bellies are still digesting their mourning manner as they test God now in chapter 17. What's more, verse one of our chapter tells us explicitly that they were going where the Lord commanded them to go, presumably by the pillar of cloud that was leading them.

And so they could actually see that God was still with them. And yet, despite all this evidence, they question or doubt God's presence to provide and demand water now.

But this is what it means to test God. It means to doubt, demand and despise. So to doubt his word such that we demand some immediate proof or sign, despite already having enough evidence to trust him.

Like Gideon, the famous woolen fleece. Gideon, who doubted God's promise to save Israel through him. So he demanded proof with the woolen fleece, despite the angel of the Lord already appearing to him.

Or on the next slide from Mark chapter 8, where the Pharisees come and began to question or doubt Jesus to test him. And they demanded a sign from heaven, despite all the miracles Jesus had already performed.

[8 : 30] Or like us. The other night, the kids asked us, are you ever going to give us dinner? Despite the fact that we've fed the little rotters every night their whole lives.

Well, Michelle has fed them, I must be honest. Or more seriously, I remember talking with someone from church who was struggling to get work. And they said, if God really loves me, why hasn't he answered my prayers and given me a job?

If he really loves me, he'd give me a job. In other words, he was doubting God's love and demanding proof in the form of a job by which he meant now, this week coming.

Even though he had the evidence of God providing jobs for him in the past. Even though he had the proof of God's love at the cross. I mean, giving your most precious son to save a people who rejected you.

I mean, is that not proof enough of love? And so instead of testing God, Israel was supposed to trust God. Ask God and patiently wait for him to provide because he was with them to do just that.

[9 : 46] And that's what we see next in the next part of the outline on the slide. So pick it up at verse 5 in your Bibles. The Lord answered Moses, Go out in front of the people.

Take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile and go. I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb.

Strike the rock and water will come out of it for the people to drink. So Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel.

Now, how gracious is God at this point? These people doubt and demand despite all they'd seen. And yet God still graciously provides for them, doesn't he? They don't deserve it. Yeah, but that's what he does for that. That's grace, isn't it?

[10 : 42] Undeserved generosity. Though we shouldn't let this fool us into thinking that testing God is okay because he'll graciously provide for us anyway. Rather, the name of the place in verse 7 is not positive.

The double-barreled name is negative. And in fact, we'll later see that this episode becomes a warning throughout Scripture of not testing God.

But in the process of providing for them, which is the next part of your outline on the slide, God also reaffirms his presence with them.

And I think that's why God tells Moses to go out in front of all the people and take the staff in his hand, the staff with which he struck the Nile. You see, this staff was a symbol of God's power.

We'll see it come up later. And Moses is to pass before all the people and take some leaders as witnesses as well, so that they can see that the water will come by God's power, not Moses.

[11 : 51] And to prove it, he says, strike a rock to get water from. I mean, that's not where you normally get water from, is it? I mean, it's like trying to get, I don't know, orange juice from a cow or something like that.

Only God can do this, so he must be with them, you see. Now, I realize some suggest that the rock retained, they talk about the rock, yeah, it would have retained some water.

It was just the outside of the rock that was dry and hard. So as soon as you crack it, water would have gushed out. But enough water to feed all of Israel, thousands upon thousands of them.

In fact, the name Horeb actually means dry. So God deliberately tells Moses to go to a dry place, use the staff, the symbol of his power, to get water for thousands of people from a rock.

Why? Well, again, to show that he is still with them, for only he could do this. In fact, in verse 6, God says that he will stand before Moses by the rock.

[12 : 59] Do you see that? Presumably in the pillar of cloud, so that people can know he is still with them. So stop testing God and start trusting him, for he is with them to provide, you see.

And the application for us is the same. Although whenever we want to apply the Old Testament to ourselves, we need to apply it through Christ, which is the next part on the outline on the slide.

And as we do, we see that in Christ, God has provided all that we need to live a godly life, including every spiritual blessing, like the blessing, what we need most, forgiveness.

For God gave his only son to take our punishment in our place for our sins, so that we might be forgiven instead. And through Christ, God has also given us his spirit, such that he is with us always.

Our problem, though, is that we are often impatient with God providing, aren't we? Or we don't know what God actually promises to provide, and so we can sometimes have wrong expectations.

[14 : 16] We might then complain about not having our dream job, or a significant other, or healing, or an easy life, when God never promised to provide those things in the first place.

Now, God does promise us lots of things, and if you have printed off the outline from the website, on the second page, I've listed a whole stack of God's promises that he does give us, so that we can know which promises to expect and not expect, that we might not test God, you know, keep demanding he prove his love in a way that he never promised to do.

Because if we keep testing God by doubting and demanding, then we might find ourselves turning from him. That's what happened to this first generation of Israelites from Egypt.

And that's why this episode became a warning throughout the rest of the Bible. And so on the next slide, from Deuteronomy chapter 6, Moses warns the second generation from Egypt not to put God to the test, and he quotes this episode at Massa.

Or on the next slide, David quotes it in Psalm 95, and he refers to this very episode at Massa again. And this event is a warning that even the writer of Hebrews, as we heard in our second reading,

quotes or alludes to, that we might not turn away.

[15:57] You see, this event is a warning, not to test God, but to trust God, knowing he is with us to provide for our true good, actually. I was talking to a couple just this past week, and they're facing some significant struggles with work at the moment because of this virus.

And they said to me, it forced us to choose whether we would trust God or not. And then they actually said they'd been reading Psalm 95, which quotes this event here in our reading tonight. They had to choose whether they would trust God or doubt him, test him. And it's not easy, don't get me wrong, but they chose to trust him, knowing that he is with them and will provide in some way or another.

Don't test, but trust God for he is with us to provide. And the second is, don't forget, the second point is, don't forget, but fight under God for he is with us to protect.

So point two, God's presence to protect, and verse eight in your Bibles. Have a look there. So the Amalekites came out of nowhere, it seems, and attacked the Israelites at Rephidim.

[17:15] That's where they still are. And we need to note from this verse, you can't see it from the verse, but we know elsewhere on the next slide that the Amalekites is an unprovoked attack.

In fact, the second generation is told by Moses on your screens there. Remember when the Amalekites did to you along the way when you came out of Egypt. When you were weary and worn out, they met you on your journey and attacked all who were lagging behind.

They had no fear of God. And so it seems they've heard, I mean, I'm pretty sure they would have heard of Israel's God who decimated Egypt and parted the Red Sea.

It had been a couple of months for the news to get to them, and yet they did not care. They came out and attacked Israel, and they attacked the vulnerable first. It was a ruthless attack on God's people because they had no fear.

But instead of God just zapping them, Moses instructs them to fight. Have a look at verse 9. Moses said to Joshua, choose some of our men and go out to fight the Amalekites tomorrow, and I will stand on top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand.

[18:33] Notice, it's not all the men that he chooses to fight, but some. It seems victory is not going to rest on these Israelites, but on God.

And that's the point, because here is the staff of God again. The symbol of God's power. You see, God is the one who will protect them from defeat and deliver them victory instead, which is the next part of the outline on your screen.

But the thing to notice is that his power will work through the raised hands of his servant, Moses, on the hill. And so, verse 10, Joshua fought the Amalekites as Moses had ordered, and Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill.

As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning. But whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning. When Moses' hands grew tired, they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it.

Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on one side, one on the other, so that his hands remained steady till sunset. So Joshua overcame the Amalekites' army with the sword.

[19:52] Now, I keep thinking Moses could have had some real fun at this point. You know, his arms have dropped, and he'd go, oh, you Amalekites might think you're winning. Ha-ha! Take that!

You know, maybe that's just my wicked sense of humour, I'm not sure, but what I am sure about is that's not what actually happened. But he did get tired, he did need help, and that kind of prepares us for next week in chapter 18.

But why this raising of hands all the time? I mean, the word hands comes up seven times in our passage here. Well, some suggest it was a posture of prayer, but it seems to be simply the means by which God's power worked.

Because that's what we've seen earlier in Exodus. Oh, the next slide on your screen, and that's what Moses did when he struck the Nile. He raised his staff, hands up, kind of thing.

Or on the next slide, when he parted the Red Sea, he stretched out his hands again. Well, so too here. A God's power to deliver comes through raised hands of his servant on a hill.

[21:03] But the point is, while they are to fight, it's God who protects them from defeat, and delivers them victory instead.

Israel's dead. And this is especially made clear if we realize that the Amalekites were one of the biggest nations around at the time. So on the screen, later, Balaam says of the Amalekites that he's

first among the nations of Canaan.

One of the great ones. And when we remember, also, Israel had just left Egypt. this is their first battle in 400 years against the first of the nations, and they win.

Of course, it's God. And Joshua will need to remember this because he will lead Israel again against the Amalekites. Have a look at verse 14.

Then Joshua, sorry, then the Lord said to Moses, write this on a scroll as something to be remembered and make sure that Joshua hears it because I will completely blot out the name of Amalek from under heaven.

[22 : 18] The name Amalek can either refer to the king or the nation, like to the man or the nation, just like the word Israel can refer to the man or the nation. But here the battle was to be recorded and given to Joshua to remember because God will use Joshua to begin blotting out the Amalekites.

Why? Well, because the Amalekites attacked God's people ruthlessly, remember? And we know that they continue to attack God's people.

So just as God will use nations to judge Israel when they sin in the future, so he is using Israel to judge this nation because of their sin in the present.

But this means that not just Joshua, but all of Israel will need to remember this day because they will need to keep fighting the Amalekites too.

And so to help them remember, verse 15, Moses built an altar and called it, the Lord is my banner. He said, because hands were lifted up against the throne of the Lord, the Lord will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation.

[23 : 34] In verse 16, we see that it's going to take generations to blot out the Amalekites. It's not going to happen straight away. And part of the reason for this is that God always gives time to people to repent.

But those Amalekites who won't repent, who won't turn to Israel's God, well, they will continue to fight God and his people until they are blotted out.

And so Israel will need to keep fighting them before they can rest in their promised land. And as they do fight, they're to remember this memorial altar that Moses sets up and names, the Lord is my banner, which is the next point on the outline on the slide.

Now, just so you know, a banner or a standard was a flag that armies carried into battle with them. So I think on the next slide I have a picture of one. There's the Roman army and the Roman standard or banner in the red there.

In fact, I think Melbourne University actually did a Roman army reenactment like this one recently, done of course by the arts faculty, but anyway, I won't say any more.

[24 : 49] But this banner was used to inspire soldiers and even communicate commands to them. So it always went into battle with them. And that's the point.

Here, the Lord himself is the banner that they are to carry into battle with them every time they fight. He is going to be with them to protect them from defeat, you see, and deliver them in victory.

And so Israel is not to forget this first victory, but fight under God, following his commands, rely on his power, for he is with them, even in battle, to protect them.

Well, what about us? Which is the next part of the outline on the slide. Well, like before, we need to first apply it through Christ.

And as we do, we see that God's power to protect came through the hands of his ultimate servant, Jesus. For as you know, Jesus stretched out his hands at the cross on a hill called Golgotha.

[26 : 07] In fact, his death is God's power to protect us, but not from physical enemies like the Amalekites, nor from facing any struggles in life, but from something much, much worse, actually, from sin, death, and the devil.

For the devil can rightly accuse us of sin, because we all have sinned, haven't we? And demand our judgment, which is eternal death, what the Bible calls hell.

now that's worse than some hairy Amalekites, isn't it? But because Christ took our judgment for our sins again, as I mentioned before, then God can protect us from the devil's accusations, and in fact protect us from eternal death.

Instead, we can have eternal life in our promised land, the new creation. salvation. This was the decisive victory that was won for us, for us who stand under the banner of Christ, for us who stand with Christ, if you like, by believing in him.

And so, can I ask you, do you trust in Christ? Do you believe in Jesus and his death for you? for us who do, then do we realize that God is still with us to protect us on our journey to the promised land?

[27 : 50] And again, not from physical enemies or bad neighbors or struggles in life, but from the devil who will keep attacking us, just like the Amalekites kept attacking Israel.

Because he will do that, he will keep tempting us and lying to us. And so we will need to keep fighting, but as we fight, we're not to forget that first victory, the decisive one that Christ won, which gives us great confidence on our journey to our promised land.

For it means our future is secure, no matter what happens. And no matter what happens after these restrictions, are relaxed. As we've already sung, no power of hell, no scheme of man can ever pluck me from his hand.

The big battle has been won, so don't forget. But do fight under God. How? Well, not so much by attacking, but by standing firm with his armour, his power.

power. Paul puts it like this on the next slide in this famous passage. He says, finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.

[29 : 14] Put on the full armour of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. ground. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood like the Amalekites, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

Therefore, put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you've done everything, to stand, and on it goes.

Actually, I have worn a suit of armour before. When I was younger, I was visiting a castle, and I saw a show with armoured knights fighting, and afterwards I asked the guys if I could put on the armour and try it, so on the next slide, this is what I look like.

They told me to pull a silly face, just for the record, I think I succeeded, looks terrible, but anyway.

And then on the next slide, they even got a battle shot, started hitting me with some swords and the like, and I could feel a thing.

It was terrific. It really does help you to stand firm. Well, so too, the armour of God.

[30 : 33] This is what it means to keep fighting under God, by his power, putting on his armour, you know, faith, truth, hope, and the things the rest of the passage lists.

So don't forget that decisive victory, but do fight under God in his strength, his armour, listening to his commands, and finally, fight knowing he is with us to protect.

As you read on our final slide, on your screens, God is faithful. He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear, but when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.

During this time of lockdown, it's actually come with a whole stack of new temptations, or even old temptations that have now been exaggerated and harder to resist.

Like we have more time to watch Netflix or Stan or whatever else there is, and more time to spend surfing the net or on Facebook and engaging in gossip and the like.

[31 : 49] More time to go onto websites that we shouldn't go onto. In fact, I got an email this week about signing a petition because there is a pornography website that is now offering free access.

It's ridiculous, isn't it? But with this time of lockdown, there is all these new temptations that we face. even doing church like this, there is a temptation to tune in when you want or tune out when you want.

Perhaps you think, I couldn't be bothered tuning in at five o'clock. I'll just watch the stream later. But of course, as soon as we say that, we don't watch it later, do we?

We forget or find something else to do. Or we can tune out. Like I said to the morning church a few weeks ago, you can turn me off whenever you like.

I won't ever know. There's a temptation to do that, isn't there? The point is there's a whole stack of new temptations during this time. But don't forget Christ's death that won the decisive victory against sin, eternal death, and the devil.

[33 : 01] Do fight under God as our banner, relying on his strength, his armor, and knowing he is with us to protect.

For he will not give us more than we can bear, and he will always give us a way out if we choose to take it. I don't know what struggles you're facing at the moment, but I know we will all face some on

our journey to our promised land.

And so when you do face them, don't test God, but trust God, knowing he is with us to provide, and don't forget, but fight under God, knowing he is with us to protect.

Let's pray we would. Let's pray. Our gracious heavenly father, we thank you for this reminder from your word tonight, that as we encounter struggles in life, we are not to test, but to trust in you, knowing that you are with us to provide, and that we can look back on our lives, and particularly at the cross, to see you've already done so much to provide for us.

And help us, we pray, as we face these struggles in life, to not forget the decisive victory that Christ has won. Our future is secure, and so to fight under you in your strength, remembering that you are with us to protect.

[34 : 34] Now help us we do these things, that we might continue to walk with Christ until we see him face to face in our promised land.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.