

The Unfailing God

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- [0 : 0 0] Before we do hear God's word this morning from Exodus chapter 17, I'll first need... There's just no way I can preach this sermon without doing a confession first. I need to confess a lifelong sin. There's this lifelong pattern of behavior.
- And frankly, it speaks in my life that frankly speaks poorly about the God who is good. And my confession is this. I am a whiner. Okay, I am a whiner. I am quick to fuss. I'm quick to complain.
- When I don't get my way, when I experience suffering. So two weeks ago, I went on a trail run with Chris Duncan. Where's Chris Duncan? Is he here this morning?
- Oh, he won't even be here to hear this. Okay. Went with Chris Duncan and our mutual friend Andrew two weeks ago. And it was really unusually warm and humid outside for this area.
- And so these guys got it into their heads when we began our run, the three of us, that we were going to run a distance that ended up being 11 and a half kilometers in Alice Lake Park. Pretty, you know, not bad if you're on flat terrain.
- [1 : 0 3] Not a lot of fun in that sort of terrain up some pretty steep hills. Now, the good part of the run was for the very first time since moving to Squamish, I did encounter a bear. So that was a fun moment.
- And everyone, now you can all settle down. I've seen a bear now. I'm halfway there to being really from Squamish. The bad part of the run was the rest of the run.
- I was unusually fatigued probably because of the weather. I was, you know, I was, frankly, I was worried about sunburn. We were out in the sun much longer than I expected. I brought lots of extra water. It wasn't enough.
- The trail, it just kept going and going. It was on and on and on and on. And so throughout the run, I fed Andrew and I fed Chris a continual stream of updates on how miserable I was.
- Anyone else, is anyone else that way or is that just me? You guys like to update all your friends on, you know, still miserable. Now, that experience of whining, that experience of grumbling, well, this morning we're going to use that as our gateway.
- [2 : 0 7] To understanding how much better the Lord is to us than we think he is. How much better the Lord is to us than we think he is. This is our gateway to the biblical book of Exodus.
- And in Exodus, we've been hearing the story of the people of Israel, long before Jesus Christ, of how the Lord God rescued them from slavery in Egypt, how the Lord led them on an exodus to freedom as his people.
- They had hope that on the other side of the desert, on the other side of what the book of Exodus calls the wilderness of Sin, the Sinai Peninsula, on the other side of that desert, there was a promised land.
- But here in the desert, as they're traveling through the desert, this is where God is teaching them that not only is he great, not only is God powerful enough to subdue Pharaoh and his entire Egyptian empire, not only is God great, but God is also good.

Now, last week we saw him show the people how he is the God who gives life. He is the God who supplies them with water and food in the wilderness. That's how he shows that he's the God who gives life.

[3 : 15] And so this week, we're going to get a little bit of a feeling of deja vu right from the get-go. Turn with me to Exodus chapter 17, verses 1 through 16. Exodus chapter 17, verses 1 through 16.

That is on page 59, if you're using the blue Bibles that our ushers provide for you. Now, these 16 verses in chapter 17 of Exodus, I'm going to start, we're going to read it in two sections.

And I'll begin by reading verses 1 through 7, just so that we can get a taste of the whining, the grumbling, the quarreling that's going on in the wilderness. 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. 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? 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 : 30] So Moses cried out to the Lord, what shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me. 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.

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.

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?

So, what was the occasion of the people's grumbling? Well, just like last week, the situation is the same. They're caravanning through the desert, and just like last week, they're running out of water.

Now, sometimes we talk about our circumstances, these circumstances, we talk about our circumstances as though they control our behavior, right? This hot weather is making me cranky.

[5 : 39] You ever said something like that? But the truth is that it's not our circumstances that are controlling our behavior. It's our perception, or our interpretation of those circumstances that's controlling our behavior.

Some people actually like hot weather. I don't know why. They're weirdos. Okay. Maybe they see it as an opportunity for a day. Some people, they go out on that hot day, and I'm miserable, and they think this is the greatest thing.

They're perceiving it entirely differently from me. The exact same circumstances. Now, the way that the people of Israel responded to their circumstances, that tells you the way they perceive things. That tells you what their perception is.

Verse 2. The people quarreled with Moses. Well, that's going to tell you a lot, right, from the get-go. Like last week's events, just like we learned last week, right?

They are directing their complaints at Moses. And just like last time around, the Lord isn't even on their radar screen. He isn't even entering their thoughts.

[6 : 41] Not a category of thoughts. Because just like last time around, they believe he is great, has been drilled into their heads with ten plagues in Egypt, with the crossing of the Red Sea.

They know he is great. They know he can beat up Pharaoh, king of Egypt. They know he's bigger than Pharaoh, but they still don't buy that he is good. That he's good to them. Even after he miraculously supplied them with water, a month earlier, at Marah.

The problem with grumbling, first of all, the problem with grumbling is it's a problem of memory. You know, when I was, two weeks ago, running down cliffs' corners, down the hill, down the hill, down the hill, I felt like, you know, I have always been running cliffs' corners.

And I will always be running cliffs' corners. I'm in this timeless state. World without end. And the people of Israel, they've always been in the desert. They always will be in the desert.

World without end. All we see is our present state of suffering. When you're caught in the middle of that suffering, when you're caught in the middle of that emotional quagmire, doesn't that just consume everything?

[7 : 50] All you see is what you're feeling right now. All you see is the circumstances around you. And it's almost like everything else that has ever happened just disappears. We forget the times in our life that the Lord has been good to us.

We forget the monuments of his goodness. Not only in our lives, but also found in scripture. Monuments of goodness like we're seeing today. And when we forget, we start to grumble.

We grumble when we forget. And then in verse 2, as well, the substance of the quarrel against Moses is as follows. Give us water to drink. Now that's a bit of a step up from Marah because in Marah, in chapter 15, the question was, what shall we drink?

A reasonable question. Maybe a bit of an acid tone to it, but on the face of it, the question is reasonable. But now this question, this question has turned into a demand.

Give us! Give us! Give us! Any, all of you who are parents of three-year-olds are now getting PTSD flashbacks, right? Give us! Gimme! Gimme! Gimme! Gimme! Gimme! I want!

[8 : 58] I want! I need! You know what happens when a desire turns into a demand? Whining happens. That's what happens. We grumble when we forget and we grumble when we demand.

And then verse 3, the grumbling intensifies into an accusation. Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?

Just in case you ever thought, wow, people today, people back then, they're just so different 3,300 years ago. They're, you know, they're so different from today. This has no relevance to my life. People still grumble and complain in the exact same ways today, don't they?

What are you trying to do? Kill us? That's what they're saying. And we still say things like that today to one another. What are you trying to do? I've heard that complaint before.

Grumbling often takes the form of an accusation against others. You and I grumble against people in our lives who are withholding or who are threatening what we demand for ourselves.

[10 : 04] We grumble when we forget. We grumble when we demand. And we grumble with accusations. Now in particular, note who is the target of their accusations.

It is Moses. It is the leader. If you're a leader, if you're in a leadership position, you're a scapegoat for grumbling. As the old saying goes, right?

You can please some of the people all 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. If you don't believe that, just try it. It's very true. Now, maybe that's why most of us don't, would prefer not to be leaders.

We would prefer not to be in that position. It's true. Often leaders, especially yours truly, probably more than most, do foolish and do sinful things.

We do need to be corrected. I owe my life with Jesus Christ to people who have corrected me.

[11 : 09] But it is also often true that people grumble against their leaders, and people often grumble against others in general, for a deeper reason. Moses brings out this reason in verse 2, when he says, why do you quarrel with me?

Why do you test the Lord? Because Moses perceives that it is not Moses that the people are really unhappy with, truly unhappy with.

It is the Lord. They're unhappy with the Lord. They're grumbling against, they are protesting against, the Lord. They believe that God is great, but they don't believe that God is good.

So as they put it in verse 7, is the Lord among us or not? Is the Lord truly the unfailing God or is he a God who can't live up to his reputation?

They're testing the Lord. But the Lord, he is not the one who should be tested here. Because the wilderness is meant to be a testing ground for the people of Israel. For them.

[12 : 13] A place where the people of Israel come to know the Lord. Where they come to experience the goodness of the Lord. Where they come to trust the Lord. And God is preparing them here in this testing ground for the covenant relationship that he is going to be forming with them at Mount Sinai beginning in chapter 19.

But the people, they don't view it as a testing ground of their faith. They're trying to turn the tables and test the Lord. As though he is the one who isn't trustworthy.

As though he is the one who has something to prove. We grumble when we forget. We grumble when we demand. We grumble with accusations. And we grumble because we deny God's goodness.

Now notice that these complaints that we're reading here, they are, these are so very different from the complaints that are found in the book of Psalms. Now there's a lot of complaints in the book of Psalms.

Especially in the Psalms of Lament. These are Psalms in which the author expresses his suffering to the Lord. And often the authors of these Psalms will speak with absolute brutal honesty to the Lord.

[13 : 23] They will, they will bear their hearts. The first two verses of Psalm 13, they just give us this classic example of a lament. Psalm 13. How long, O Lord, will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

And I don't know if you realize this, but it depends on how exactly you count them because the Psalms are, it's a little hard to classify them sometimes. But anywhere from 30 to 40% of the Psalms are Psalms of Lament.

That's a huge number. What if 30 to 40% of the worship songs that we sang on Sunday morning were laments? What would probably happen is that we would find, we would find the boldness, we would find the honesty, we would find the vocabulary to quit faking our happiness, to quit offering insincere prayers to God, and instead to offer Him who we really are deep down inside.

Instead offer to Him what we're really thinking, what's really going on. But that only works, that only works if in the middle of your wilderness suffering, you are believing and you are holding on to the truth that God is good.

[14 : 41] That's not what the people of Israel are doing. If you're like the people of Israel, if you don't believe that God is good, then you go grumbling. And by the way, you go grumbling to Moses instead of God.

That's what usually happens is you grumble to other people. You don't take it vertically to the Lord. You don't lament. The Psalms of Lament are written by people who know and who believe that God is good.

There is a confidence in them that the Lord is good and I'm facing a tension between the goodness I know He has and these awful circumstances that I'm in. But I am never, never going to stop coming into the presence of my good Father in Heaven.

I am not going to stop asking for Him to make everything right again. That's the mindset of the Psalms of Lament and it's that sort of complaint, a complaint that trusts in the goodness of the Lord, a complaint that says, I am coming to you because you are good.

That's the kind of lament that the Lord is looking for. The alternative to that is this. If you're going through hard times and you're not lamenting, you're doing something else and that is that you are nursing grievances and protests and frustrations with God and with other people and as you nurse those and as you hold on to those, they harden, they calcify into this tumor of bitterness, into this malignant cancer, this low level hatred towards God and towards other people and Moses sees that anger, he sees that hatred toward him and he sees that it's growing in verse 4 and so Moses cries out desperately to the Lord, what shall I do with this people?

[16 : 26] They are almost ready to stone me. Moses is recognizing something here. Moses is recognizing that if he is left to himself, he is going to fail.

Moses is going to fail. Moses can't provide water. This is a huge multitude, a huge caravan of people. There is no water to be found. So Moses is a failure as a leader.

This is not the first time that we've seen Moses be a failure as a leader. But in that failure, in his failure as a leader, that is where we see the good presence of the Lord.

We see the good presence of the Lord in both this wilderness event and also in the next one. The Lord's solution to the problem of this event is very simple.

Duh! You go up to a rock and you hit it with a stick. I wonder why Moses never thought of that. Now this isn't just any stick. Verse 5, he identifies it as, God identifies it as, the staff with which you struck the Nile.

[17 : 34] The staff that Moses took, raised high above his head, struck the waters of the Nile and they turned to blood. It is the staff that represents the powerful presence of the Lord, often called the staff of God.

The staff tells us this, God is great. And in verse 6, the Lord promises, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb. I will be there.

I am with you. God is not only great, God is with us. And also in verse 6, the Lord tells Moses, the people will drink. God is not only great, God is not only with us, God is good.

God is great, God is good, God is with us. And the Lord will supply life to his people, water from the rock. That's the lesson of verses 1-7.

And it's this, the good presence of the Lord brings unfailing life. The good presence of the Lord brings unfailing life. Because that water is not just like this little trick that comes out of the rock and stops.

[18 : 44] That rock turns into a spring of water, a fountain, sustaining, supplying life to the people of Israel. And by the way, this is the rock at, it says, Horeb. That's another name for Sinai. Which means that the whole time they're at Sinai, you know where they're getting their water from?

This rock. It supplies them for the rest of the book of Exodus. That's why the Apostle Paul sees in these events, he sees in these events a shadow, a hint of the coming Messiah, of the life-giving Son of God, the hint of Jesus Christ our Lord.

And in 1 Corinthians chapter 10, Paul writes, Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ. The rock is just the shadow. It's Jesus Christ who is the living, running, life-giving water, flowing fresh from the rock, Jesus.

He is the good presence of the Lord. He is the one who brings unfailing life. We're going to learn that the people of Israel don't trust that God is unfailing.

[20 : 06] And later this year we will see that. We're going to learn how they create an idol, a golden calf, a false depiction of God. This idol will be their new object of worship and trust.

They're looking for an idol to be the thing that gives them life. That's why Paul warns in these same verses. He warns you and me as well. Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.

My beloved, you who I love, flee. Run away. Flee from idolatry. Run away. Scream. Drop everything. Get out of there. Get away from finding life in someone or something else other than Jesus Christ.

Get away from treating other people or money or activities or possessions as though that's your ultimate source of security. That's your ultimate source of favor.

That's your ultimate source of justice. Fear the Lord. Flee from idolatry. Because you who are Christians, you who believe in Jesus Christ, who trust in His body, crucified and broken for us, His blood spilled, sacrificed for us, you who know that Jesus Christ has been raised to new life and who offers real life, who offers the good life, who offers eternal life to everyone who believes in Him, you who are Christians, drink deeply from the rock.

[21 : 35] Satisfy yourselves from no other spring, no other fountain of life, because they will all dry up. They will all fail you. They are not the good life. They will let you down.

The water will run out. But this is the rock that will follow you. And the water will never run out. This is Christ. Let's not try to provide water for ourselves.

Drink from the rock. Tonight you can do that. 6.30 tonight. We're getting together to pray as we cry out to the Lord to provide for our church as we continue our pastoral search.

You know why we don't like to pray? Well, there's a lot of reasons. But one is this. Praying looks dumb. Doesn't it? It looks like hitting a rock with a stick. You're just talking.

To who? Your imaginary friend? Praying looks dumb. It feels dumb. We'd much rather be doing something. You can always get more people to show up at a prayer meeting if you offer to do something in addition to praying.

[22 : 36] to us coming to our God for life. Depending on Him and Him alone. That is the only hope we have. What are we even doing here if we're not doing that?

Let's show one another and let's show our town that doesn't believe that God is good, that believes that the good life is found in other things, other activities, other people, other, you know, just about anything other than the Lord.

Let's show our town the good presence of the Lord is what brings unfailing life. The good presence of the Lord does even more than that. Because it's not long afterward that there is an enormous threat to the people of God.

This threat arrives and it's an army of desert raiders. The Amalekites. These Amalekites, the people of Amalek, they're experienced.

Their whole culture is built around this. Taking advantage of weak and helpless caravans wandering through a desert. It's like they're made for this moment. They've heard about this caravan and this is, this is the prize.

[23 : 42] It's weighed down with wealth from Egypt. Families, small children, livestock, the mother load. And if these Amalekites succeed in killing and robbing the people and bringing them to ruin, then they are going to wipe out the people of God.

And what that means is that they are going to bring a permanent end to the plan of God to save the world through Jesus Christ who is descended from the people of Israel. That means that if this Amalekite raid succeeds, it brings death to the entire world and to you and me.

We are not here this morning if this raid succeeds. your life and mine depends on this truth. The good presence of the Lord brings unfailing security.

The good presence of the Lord not only brings unfailing life, but unfailing security. And verses 8 through 16 tell us what happens. Then Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim.

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.

[24 : 53] So Joshua did as Moses told him and fought with Amalek while Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed.

And whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed. 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. And Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the sword. 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.

And Moses built an altar and called the name of it The Lord is my banner saying, A hand upon the throne of the Lord. The Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation.

Now, verse 9. I love Moses' response here. Choose for us men. Just grab some guys. Anyone bring a sword with them.

[26 : 05] I bet right now someone's like, Well, I guess I did take one from that Egyptian when we were asking for stuff. Okay, I've got a sword. Okay, you're a soldier now. Go fight. You're conscripted.

You're in the military now. The people of Israel, they are slaves. They have zero, zero military training. They have no idea what they're doing. More than likely, what's probably going on is they are running out on foot, disorganized, ragtag militia to do battle with experienced warriors mounted on camels.

I learned this week that camels are very fast. They're good. Mounted troops on camels are apparently quite a formidable fighting force. And camels are mean.

So Moses, he does order this human response that's led by his protege, Joshua. If that's all that they've got, they're done.

They're cooked. But the desert field where these two armies meet, that is not where the true battle is taking place. There's barely any details about that here because that's not what's really important. The real battle is on a hill.

[27 : 12] A hill that's overlooking the field. A hill where Moses is seeking a divine response from the Lord. And what does Moses promise to do in verse 9?

Well, remember, Moses' water supply solution was hitting a rock with a stick. Moses' battle plan is holding a stick up in the air. Once again, sounds really dumb. Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand.

But this time, remember, it's not just any stick. This is the staff of God. It represents the powerful presence of the Lord. And Moses stands on the hill. Moses holds it high above his head.

And this staff acts as a military standard. On the battlefield, in the confusion of the battlefield, the military standard is what soldiers rally around. That's their leader.

That's their leader. Their military standard is the powerful presence of the Lord. And as the powerful presence of the Lord is raised high for all to see, that ragtag Israelite militia is winning the battle against all odds.

[28 : 22] Now here's the problem. We mentioned earlier, human leaders, we do not have what it takes. We fail. We're weak. Moses isn't any different.

Look, I don't care how strong you are, nobody has the physical strength to hold a heavy staff high in the air like this for hours and hours and hours and hours on end. Let alone an 80-year-old man, by the way.

Moses has to take a breather from time to time to rest his arms. So whenever he lowers the staff, the standard is gone. The powerful presence of the Lord is no longer that standard for the people of Israel.

and immediately they lose the advantage. The Amalekites gain ground. Moses is failing. But the Lord has surrounded Moses with fellow leaders who can support him.

They give him a rock to sit on. They hold up his arms. I mean, this is goofy. Like, he's sitting on a rock, two guys are actually on his side, each one holding up one arm so he can keep the stick up in the air.

[29 : 26] And the Israelites win the battle because of it. The message is unmistakably clear. Moses is inadequate as a leader. Moses is not strong enough.

Moses doesn't have what it takes, but the Lord does. The good presence of the Lord brings unfailing security. And Israel wins the battle that day.

and because they won the battle that day, you and I have the good presence of the Lord in the person of Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit whom Jesus promised to send us, who is among us today.

As for the people of Israel, the security of the Lord is promised, not just for that day. It doesn't just end when Moses comes down off the hill.

It's promised for the future. The Lord promises in verse 14, I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. He even makes it clear. That's a promise you can write down, by the way.

[30 : 24] He's saying, write that down, put it in Joshua's ears, tell him. This is a promise. This civilization, whose entire purpose is raiding, pillaging, killing, raping, destroying, it's going to be brought to utter ruin.

And you know what? That promise came true. We know next to nothing about the Amalekites today. I'm just even making up that camel thing. I don't even know for sure.

We don't even know if they rode camels. Apart from a few details we find in scripture, they're gone from history. Their memory has been blotted out from under heaven because of the Lord's prophecy through Moses in verse 16.

The Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation. And this offers us on the one hand a word of warning and on the other hand a word of comfort. Much like Jesus' words in Luke chapter 12 that we encountered a few weeks back.

Both warning and comfort. It's a word of warning because it tells us that the Lord will never relent from destroying those who threaten to bring to ruin his plan of salvation for the world.

[31 : 29] The Lord does not relent from that. The Lord will never relent from destroying those who threaten the people that he loves. It's also a word of comfort because it means that the Lord is good to his people.

It means that he loves his daughters and sons. The wrath of God exists because God is love. Because God loves his people he has wrath against anything that threatens his plan for his people for his church for those he has called to himself.

So you who believe you can have confidence that the good presence of the Lord brings unfailing security. And as for the people of Israel their victory came that day because of the standard that Moses held high.

And that's why in verse 15 he gives he builds a memorial altar a monument to God's goodness. And he calls the name of the memorial altar literally the name Yahweh Nisi.

It's usually translated as the Lord is my banner. More literally it means the Lord Yahweh Yahweh my signal pole or Yahweh my standard.

[32 : 46] Because the Lord he is the one we hold high. He is the one the only one we rally around. He is the one who brings victory. We find our security only in him.

boast only in him. And in Jeremiah chapter 9 it is written let not the wise man boast in his wisdom. Let not the mighty man boast in his might.

Let not the rich man boast in his riches. Let him who boasts boast in this that he understands and knows me that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love justice and righteousness in the earth for in these things I delight declares the Lord.

To know the Lord to trust the Lord to rely on the Lord to experience his goodness each and every day. He is all we have.

He is all we need. He is all we could ever want. Yahweh my standard. Once again tonight at 630 we are meeting together to pray we will be pleading with the Lord for security for our church family for the future and for life for our church family.

[34 : 04] We won't be grumbling when we meet together. We will be weaving together our lament with celebration because we are going to be holding fast to the truth that God is great God is with us and God is good.

He is the unfailing God and so the good presence of the Lord brings unfailing life and unfailing security. Let's pray.