

The Gospel in the Old Testament
Exodus 17:1-7

Sermon Point: We need to put aside the misconception that the Old Testament is Law and the New Testament is Gospel. The Old Testament also communicates Gospel—saved by Christ alone through faith. Here the Israelites are disbelieving—and God saves them. New Testament authors take this scene as a symbol of Christ who would come (1 Cor 10:4).

You've heard the phrase "practicing medicine"? A doctor should make clear to his patients he is only practicing medicine. He hasn't perfected it, practice makes perfect. We don't count Spring Training games in baseball, ya know? We don't count dress rehearsals. He's just practicing.

We're continuing to practice reading the Bible. Practice does make purpose. Serious, it takes hundreds of times of doing something before we really begin to learn it. It takes about 4,500 hours of practicing the piano to become proficient enough to sight read music.¹ It takes years of practice to become an amateur carpenter. Like all things, reading the Bible takes repetition and practice.

The number one skill we've been practicing is to focus on what God does (or if it's in the New Testament, what Jesus does, since Jesus is fully human and fully divine). This helps us to focus on the Gospel, the Good News above everything else going on in the passage. It is too easy to get lost in the details, and especially to be distracted by asking, "What should I be doing?" rather than to hear "What is God doing?"

We need to especially practice the skill of hearing the Gospel in the Old Testament because for too long Christians have been told that the Old Testament is a book of Law not Gospel, that God is wrathful in the OT and graceful in the NT. This is both wrong and dangerous. It's wrong, because the OT has the good news of God saving, not just instructions for God's people. It's dangerous, because this view contributed Christians to abuse our Jewish neighbors, especially in the Holocaust in Germany. We should never forget this shameful history, and repent of anything that contributed to it.

The Old Testament is the collection of writings about many experiences that people had with God over about a 1000 year period, from perhaps as early as 1200 BCE to 200 BCE, composed in oral stories about Creation, Abraham and Moses down to the time when Jewish rebels were revolting against the Greeks. In it, we can read of the many gracious and saving acts of God. Last week, for example, we read about God's promises to Abraham—which is the foundation of how we understand what Jesus was doing. Jesus was fulfilling the promises made to Abraham. We can't have the Gospel of the New Testament without the Gospel of the Old Testament, especially in the promises to Abraham.

Today we want to read Exodus 17:1-7 and practice the two skills we learned and add a third. First, we look for what God does. Second, we look for the response of faith to what God does. Then, we'll add the third.

First, what does God do in this passage? Where's the first place God acts?

¹ <https://yourmusiclessons.com/blog/how-long-does-it-take-to-learn-piano/>

It's not until verse 5: God says to Moses, to "pass by" the people and pick out some leaders and go to a rock that Moses will strike with his staff, and out will come water to satisfy the thirsty people. God's action is to save the people from thirst by directing Moses to strike a rock. Do you hear the Gospel, "We are saved by God alone through faith"? Yes: God alone provides the water. So circle "the Lord said" in verse 5—that's what God does.

We can see that when early Christians also read this passage in Exodus, they heard Gospel. In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians he interpreted this passage to be symbolic of Jesus, the source of living water for spiritually thirsty people (1 Cor 10:4). Write that verse in the margin of your Bibles.

The second skill we are practicing is identifying how people respond in faith. If "God said" is the good news here, where is the response of faith? Right: at the end of verse 6 it says, "Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel." So put a rectangle around "Moses did so." He heard God's Word and trusted it and so he acted on it. The Bible doesn't need to say that he passed before the elders, took some of them, went to the rock and strike the rock, etc. All it says is "Moses did so." He trusted God would keep God's promise—and so he acted in faith.²

We should not minimize the trust Moses required for this action. God has told him to strike a rock with his staff and water will come out for people to drink. On the face of it, it sounds a little crazy. It's a staff, after all, and a rock is a rock. But there have been enough promises made and kept that Moses trusts God's Word and is willing to act on it.

Likewise, when God promises us forgiveness, it may seem a bit crazy to act as if the past didn't hold us back. When God promises us resurrection, it may seem crazy to not worry about death. When God promises freedom from addictive behavior, it may seem crazy to give up the friends and places that we thought supported us. It may be crazy to fast and give up a meal, or live without the luxuries we want, but when God promises, we can trust it.

The third skill we want to develop is to be clear about what God saves from. The Gospel, again, is that "we are saved by God alone through faith." We've identified God's action is to guide Moses. The response "through faith" is Moses acting on God's Word. What is God saving them from? Let's not make the answer more complicated: it is simply thirst. Honest to goodness, biological thirst. Verse 1 says, "there was no water for the people to drink." So, what we will do is underline that passage of who is saved and what they are saved from. The people were complaining about their thirst—wouldn't you? On another level, you could say they were saved from complaining, but that was only temporary until the next time they had something to complain about!

So, the three parts of we are practicing: first, identify what God does. Second, identify what the response of faith is. Third, identify who is saved and what they are saved from. These three parts help keep our eyes on the Gospel and then we can ask how this applies to our lives.

How do we apply this passage? First, we note that God does care and listen to us when we complain. Second, God provides through leader's faithfulness. God speaks, Moses acts trusting. How is God speaking to us, guiding us? Are we listening and acting in faith?

² We should note that this story has other versions in the Bible, namely where Moses' actions are taken to be unfaithful in Numbers 20, by striking the rock rather than commanding it. But we are reading Exodus and listening to this author right now.