

## The Rock of Moses: Is the LORD Among Us?

At Sinai God gave Israel not only the law of His covenant, but also the tent of His dwelling. God would be their God by His presence as well as by His word. In the cloud on Mount Sinai, Moses received detailed instructions for the building of the tabernacle, the tent that would be the house of God in the midst of the tents of Israel.

For forty days Moses remained on top of the mountain, screened from Israel by the cloud of God's presence. When he at last began his descent, he held in his hands the tablets of stone on which God had written the words of His law. Yet the weight of God's law in his hands was less than a weight he carried on his heart. God had given Moses a final command: to go down to a people who had already turned away from the covenant they had so solemnly affirmed. Moses carried the command God had thundered from Sinai: "You shall not make for yourself an idol" (Ex. 20:4). But God told Moses that the people down below had already made an idol in the form of a golden calf. They had worshiped it and sacrificed to it.

Moses' foreboding was heightened as he heard the sounds coming from the camp below. Joshua, who was attending Moses, thought that he heard the sound of battle. Moses replied, "It is not the sound of victory, it is not the sound of defeat; it is the sound of singing that I hear" (Ex. 32:18).

When Moses could see as well as hear the licentious orgy at the foot of the mountain, it was too much for him. In anger he flung down the tablets of God's law; they shattered at his feet. Then God's judgment broke up the riot of rebellious idolatry. Moses stood at the entrance of the camp and called out for those who were for the Lord. Only the Levites, Moses' own tribe, rallied to him. Moses commissioned them to execute God's sentence on the rebels. About three thousand died as the Levites carried out their grim task.

Moses returned to meet with the Lord. What future could there be for Israel? If the people completely violated God's covenant at the very foot of the mountain where God was still speaking, what point was there in continuing the covenant relation? Was not Israel already judged and rejected? Moses pled with God not to blot Israel out of the book of life, but to blot out his name instead. The apostle Paul, centuries later, reflected that plea of Moses. Paul, too, servant of the Lord in the New Covenant, said that he would be willing to be cursed and cut off from Christ "for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel" (Rom. 9:3-4).

The Lord would not remove the name of Moses from His book (Ex. 32:32). Instead, He proposed to Moses an alternative plan for the relation of God to Israel. God would not dwell in the midst of Israel. That was too dangerous, for they were a "stiff-necked" people, proud and rebellious. If God were to go up in

the midst of them even for a moment, His presence could destroy them (Ex. 33:5).

God's alternate plan did not default on His promises. He would go before the people in the presence of His angel. He would lead them into the land of promise, defeat their enemies, drive out the wicked inhabitants of the land, and give them their promised possession. But He would not go up in their midst.

There would then be no need to build the tabernacle, for the purpose of that construction was to provide a tent in which God could dwell in the midst of the people of Israel; His tent was to be in the center of the camp, their tents pitched around it, according to their tribes. Rather than setting up the tabernacle, Moses would continue the practice that had apparently been begun already. He would have a "tent of meeting" set up well outside the camp. God would come to the door of that tent in the cloud of glory to meet with Moses. When Moses went out to the tent, the people would stand respectfully to watch him go. When the cloud descended they were to worship. If any man needed to inquire of the Lord, he could go out to the tent and speak with Moses.

The change that God proposed was not in substituting an angel for His own presence. The Angel of the Lord was theophanous, the appearing of God in the form of His messenger. "Do not rebel against him; he will not forgive your rebellion, since my Name is in him" (Ex. 23:21). The issue was rather whether the Lord would go before the people in the presence of His Angel, drive out their enemies, and give them the land, or whether God would go up in the midst of them. Should the tabernacle be built so that God could be in their midst, or should God continue to come to the door of the tent of meeting, at a distance from the camp?

We might suppose that Moses would have welcomed God's proposal. Surely the danger of God's holy presence in the midst of the camp of Israel was obvious. What advantages would Israel lose under the new arrangement? They still had access to God. They still had Moses as their mediator. They still had God leading them through the desert and the guarantee of His gift of the land.

Indeed, what God proposed seems to be precisely what many people today want of religion. They do not want to lose all contact with God, but prefer that their relations with Him be handled by a professional. Let a clergyman do the praying. It is well to have God available at no great distance. We might need His help—in a counseling center perhaps, or as a national deity who could restrain the Kremlin. But to have God at the center of our lives—that is decidedly too close. His presence would be most inconvenient for some of our business deals, our entertainment, or our grabbing a little of the gusto that the TV commercials advertise.

Knowing Israel as he did, did Moses at once close on God's offer, thanking Him for His thoughtfulness in deciding to be God at a convenient distance? Quite to

the contrary. Moses was distraught, and went into profound mourning. Following his lead, Israel mourned, too. They put off their jewelry (the gold that had not been melted down for the golden calf), and waited while Moses went to speak with God. Again Moses poured out his heart before the Lord. Had not God said that he knew Moses by name? Was not Israel God's people? "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?" (Ex. 33:15–16).

Nothing could compare with the immediate presence of God in the midst of His people. The favor for which Moses prayed was obviously not based on the performance record of Israel. He was pleading for the favor of grace, the favor of God's calling that had distinguished His people from all the other nations. If God were not to seal that favor with His own presence, the whole enterprise was useless. Why go to the land of promise in any case? Moses sought the land, not because the milk and honey of Canaan was to be preferred to the fish and lentils of Egypt, but because the land of Israel was the place where God would set His name, the place of His house among His people. If God were not to dwell among His people, there would be no point in going to the place of His choosing.

God's covenant was that He would be their God, and they His people; fellowship with God was the heart of the covenant. To seal his request, Moses sought exactly what God's presence in the midst offered: the revelation of God's glory. "Now show me your glory," prayed Moses (Ex. 33:18).

Was this a strange request? Had not Moses seen the glory of the Lord in the cloud? Had he not communed with God as he received His commandments? Yes, but Moses yearned for a fuller knowledge of the Lord. God had said that He knew Moses by name; Moses likewise wanted to know God by name in a full and personal encounter.

Moses could not plead for the continuance of God's presence on the basis of what Israel had done or would do. He could not offer to God the kind of excuses about the golden calf that Aaron had offered to him. If he would secure God's continuing presence, his only appeal had to be to the nature of God Himself, to the covenant faithfulness of the God of grace. To secure God's favor, Moses asked Him to reveal Himself, to proclaim His name.

This is what God did. He could not permit Moses to see the full glory of His face, but He would allow him to see His back. God covered Moses in the crevice of a rock while His glory passed by. He proclaimed His name afresh to Moses: the "I AM" God, who would be gracious to whom He would be gracious. His sovereign mercy was the hope of Moses and of Israel. He is eternally the God who is "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

Moses' prayer was answered. God would go with His people. The tabernacle would be built to symbolize His presence in the midst. The plan of the tabernacle presents a double image: on the one hand, there were barriers that cordoned off God's holiness; on the other, a way of access was opened by His grace. The curtains of the tabernacle screened off the glory of the Lord's presence, but a way of approach was provided.

The worshiper could enter the courtyard and offer his sacrifice at the great bronze altar in the forecourt. The priests, after washing at the laver, could enter the holy place to pray to God at the altar of burnt incense. Beyond the holy place was the holy of holies, where the ark of the covenant was kept. Into that sanctuary only the high priest could go, and then only once a year on the day of atonement. Nevertheless, the tabernacle provided the open way into the presence of the Lord who dwelt in the midst of His people.

His request granted, Moses prayed one of the most beautiful prayers in the Bible: "If now I have found grace in thy sight, O Lord, let my Lord, I pray thee, go among us; for it is a stiff-necked people, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for thine inheritance" (Ex. 34:9, KJV).

Because the people of Israel were stiff-necked, God had said that He could not go in their midst. But for that very reason, Moses asked God to go with them, forgiving their iniquity and sin. He does not ask God to give Israel their inheritance, but to take Israel as His inheritance. Moses laid hold of God's grace, and prayed that God would make Israel His prized possession.

John holds this passage in view in the first chapter of his Gospel (John 1:14–18). He reminds us that the law was given by Moses, but that the "grace and truth" of which Moses wrote (Ex. 34:6) came through Jesus Christ. Throughout the Gospel of John, we learn of the way in which Moses testified of Christ. Jesus said, "If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me" (John 5:46). When John says "No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him" (John 1:18, KJV), he is thinking of God's revelation to Moses. Moses had not been permitted to see God, but the full glory of God has now been revealed in Jesus Christ.

Some Bible translations lose the force of John's testimony by not translating literally John's word for "tenting" or "tabernacling": "And the Word became flesh, and tabernacled among us (and we beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father), full of grace and truth" (John 1:14, ASV margin).

Here John is declaring the fulfillment of the revelation of God to Moses. The issue was God's presence in the midst of His people. The symbol of that continuing presence was the tabernacle; there the glory of the God who is "full of grace and truth" was revealed. But what was a symbol in the time of Moses has become a reality in Jesus Christ. The true and abiding Tabernacle is not a tent of goatskins,

but the incarnate Lord. Even the glory cloud is but a symbol of the presence of the Lord; Jesus is the Lord Himself, the true Temple.

Jesus could tell the woman of Samaria that not even Jerusalem was the place where God must be worshiped, because the hour had come when He must be worshiped in Spirit and in truth (John 4:23–24): in Spirit, because Jesus could give her the water of the Spirit; in truth, because Jesus was the Truth, the reality of which the Temple was the symbol. That hour was coming with Jesus' death and resurrection; indeed, that hour had already come because Jesus had already come: "I who speak to you am he" (John 4:26). Both the tablets of the law and the tabernacle were given by God at Sinai. Both point to Christ, who is the fulfillment of the law to all who believe and who is the heavenly Priest, the Lamb of God, and the true Tabernacle.

Both the law and the worship at Sinai were expressions of God's covenant, a covenant fulfilled in Jesus Christ in whom it was made new. It was not just in the institutions of the covenant that Christ was anticipated, however. He was also foreshadowed in the history of the covenant. The story of redemption in the Old Testament is the story of Jesus.

God led Israel on from Sinai as they journeyed toward Canaan. His purpose in leading them was not rapid transportation. It was education. Moses reflected on God's curriculum as the covenant was renewed with a second generation at the border of Canaan:

*Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. . . . Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the LORD your God disciplines you. (Deut. 8:2–5)*

The word of the Lord by which Israel was to live was not only the word spoken from Sinai. It was also the word that directed Israel's journeys day by day. The people were humbled, tested, taught that God was faithful, and shown His unfailing provision. God showed Israel their own helplessness in order that they might find Him to be their help in every distress. His instruction went beyond testing. By His deeds of deliverance He also pictured the spiritual reality of the covenant. God's feeding them with manna, for example, graphically portrayed the truth that life is God's gift and that His children are given the bread of heaven from their Father.

Jesus pointed this out to the crowds He fed in the wilderness. He fed more than five thousand from the five loaves and two fish in a boy's lunch basket. But for many the miracle was not spectacular enough. They demanded a more

astonishing provision of bread. Let Jesus give manna in the desert as Moses had done. Jesus answered in a way that showed that the manna was a type of God's spiritual provision: "I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world" (John 6:32–33).

As the words of Jesus show, there is more than a superficial allegory to be found in God's giving of the manna. The Lord's provision of life from above points beyond physical nourishment. If food were the only thing missing for the people, they need not have left Egypt. Indeed, many of them preferred the leeks and fish of Egypt to the manna: "We detest this miserable food!" (Num. 21:5). God gave the manna to teach about His gift of spiritual life through faith. Israel was taught to trust God for daily bread in more than a physical sense. Thus there was good reason for a pot of manna to be placed within the ark of the covenant.

The instructional content of the wilderness episodes pointed forward as well as upward. Israel was taught to anticipate the future blessings promised in God's covenant. For example, when the bitter water of Marah was healed at God's command, God made the incident a sign of His covenant promise: "I am the LORD, who heals you" (Ex. 15:26). The tree that Moses cast into the bitter water became a sign of God's removal of the curse by the sweetness and balm of the tree of life (Gen. 2:9; Ezek. 47:12).<sup>1</sup>

Through the history of God's dealings with His covenant people, this promise was repeated. Jeremiah cried, "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?" (Jer. 8:22). He prayed, "Heal me, O LORD, and I will be healed; save me and I will be saved, for you are the one I praise" (Jer. 17:14).

In answer, God repeated His promise to His prophet and His people: "But I will restore you to health and heal your wounds" (Jer. 30:17; 33:6). God Himself would come to remove the curse and to heal and restore His people: " 'He will come to save you.' Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb shout for joy" (Isa. 35:4–6).

God Himself promised to be the Healer of His people; yet His healing work was to be accomplished through His Anointed. This Messiah would bind up the brokenhearted and comfort those who mourn, for He would bring in the year of God's favor (Isa. 61:1–2). In Isaiah's amazing description of the Suffering Servant of the Lord, we learn that He would come to bear our griefs and sicknesses, and that by His wounds we are healed (Isa. 53:5). Matthew describes the healing ministry of Jesus on a Sabbath evening in Capernaum, and then reminds us of these words: "He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases" (Matt. 8:17; cf. Isa. 53:4). God's sign of healing at Marah and all His care for Israel in the wilderness was preparation on the screen of history for the fulfillment that was yet to come with Jesus Christ.

This is clear in another remarkable incident in the desert. When a second generation of wandering Israelites rebelled against God's direction of their march, God judged their revolt by sending poisonous serpents among them. They cried for deliverance, and God commanded Moses to forge a serpent of brass and lift it up on the standard (perhaps the rod of the Lord). The people were commanded to look at the serpent of brass, and those who looked were healed and lived (Num. 21:4–9).

Jesus referred to this event when He described His mission to Nicodemus, a member of the Sanhedrin who came to him by night. "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him" (John 3:14–15, NIV margin). The brass serpent, the image of the curse upon Israel, was lifted up as a sign of God's power over the curse and His deliverance from it.

Jesus must have amazed Nicodemus by comparing the "lifting up" of the Son of Man to the lifting up of the serpent. The Son of Man was the glorious figure described in Daniel's prophecy (Dan. 7:13–14). Daniel depicted Him as coming on the clouds of heaven to receive the rule of God's eternal Kingdom. How could such a glorious figure be compared to the metal effigy of a poisonous snake?

The comparison is profound. Jesus is the Son of Man; He spoke of His being lifted up to glory as beginning with His being lifted up to the cross. When He said, "But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself" (John 12:32), He was referring not merely to His ascension but to "the kind of death he was going to die" (John 12:33).

Jesus was "lifted up" and exposed on the cross as one accursed. That in itself was enough to convince Saul the Pharisee that Jesus could not be the Messiah. Jesus had been crucified, and the law of God said that anyone hung on a tree was cursed (Deut. 21:23). But after Christ appeared to Saul on the road to Damascus, he came to understand that the very event that seemed to disprove the Messiahship of Jesus was its demonstration. Saul the persecutor became Paul the apostle, resolved to know nothing but Christ and Him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2). He taught that "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree'" (Gal. 3:13).

Like the serpent on the rod, Christ on the cross was the embodiment of the curse. He bore the judgment of death because He bore the guilt of sin. He was smitten of God and afflicted because the Lord laid on Him the iniquity of us all (Isa. 53:6). "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21). At the cross God triumphed over the powers of darkness; the lifting up of Christ on the cross was followed by the resurrection and His being lifted up to glory (John 13:31; Acts 5:31). Jesus also had His ascension to glory in view: "No one has ever gone into heaven except the

one who came from heaven—the Son of Man, who is in heaven” (John 3:13, NIV margin).

As we saw in connection with Jacob’s dream, Jesus Himself was the ultimate answer to the question of Agur in the book of Proverbs (30:4): “Who has gone up to heaven and come down? Who has gathered up the wind in the hollow of his hands? . . . What is his name, and the name of his son? Tell me if you know!”

Jesus, who came down from heaven, ascended to heaven: his “lifting up” began at the cross. God triumphed over the curse in the victory of Calvary (Col. 2:13–15).

From early in the wilderness wanderings of Israel comes the most vivid image of the triumph of God’s grace in His covenant with Israel. Only a few months after the deliverance of Israel from Egypt, the Lord brought them to Rephidim on the way to Mount Sinai (Ex. 17:1–7). There was no water where they camped. In the arid climate of the Sinai desert, dehydration takes place in hours rather than days. When their water skins became empty, death was certain. “So they quarreled with Moses and said, ‘Give us water to drink’ ” (Ex. 17:2).

Unfortunately, the word “quarrel” does not adequately express the meaning of the Hebrew term. “They lodged a complaint with Moses” would be closer to the meaning. The word is the root of “Meribah,” the name given to the place of this incident (Ex. 17:7).<sup>2</sup> It is a legal term describing the institution of a lawsuit. In the prophets it is used to express the lawsuit that God brought against Israel because they broke His covenant (Mic. 6:1–8). Meribah designated Israel’s lawsuit against God.

The legal action the people proposed to take was first against Moses. “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?” (Ex. 17:3). Moses, they charged, was guilty of treason and deserved to be executed by stoning. They would stone Moses, not as an act of mob violence, but as the execution of the death sentence by the community. If their bones were to bleach under the fierce sun, then let Moses first pay the penalty.

Understandably, Moses protested: “Why do you [bring charges against] me? Why do you put the LORD to the test?” (Ex. 17:2). It is not really Moses but God that the people would put on trial: “Is the LORD among us or not?” (Ex. 17:7).

God had brought Israel into the desert to make His covenant with them. He led them in order to teach them; testing was part of the training process. At the end of the journey, Moses would eventually to say to them:

*Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers*



*had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. (Deut. 8:2–3)*

Israel had just been shown God's care in the provision of manna for their hunger, yet they did not trust Him to give water for their thirst. They failed to see that they, not God, were on trial at Rephidim.

It was not the first or the last time that rebels against God reversed the situation to summon God to trial. Soon after World War II a play was produced in Germany, *The Sign of Jonah*, written by Guenter Rutenborn.<sup>3</sup> It appeared just as the German people were confronted by the horrors of the Holocaust. Belsen, Dakau, and Auschwitz had just been exposed—the concentration camps where the Nazis attempted the “final solution” of genocide.

The play posed the question, “Who is to blame?” Both the cast and the audience were drawn into the answer. But no one felt personally to blame. The housewife had struggled with rationing, the industrialist had kept up steel production, even the storm trooper had only been following his orders.

But in defending their innocence, the accused become accusers; they indict one another. They are all guilty—in differing degrees, some by words and some by silence, some in what they did, and some in what they failed to do. Under their guilt, they begin to use the same excuse: the blame is higher up—higher up in the army, higher up in the Party . . . higher up. “The real blame is much higher up. God is to blame. He is the One to be put on trial.”

Who would not join in calling God to account for the misery of the world? Who indeed? The Bible answers: the one who lives by faith. The charges brought by Israel at Massah-Meribah show what the Bible calls “a sinful, unbelieving heart” (Heb. 3:12). Moses later warned Israel that they were not to put the Lord on trial as they did at Massah-Meribah (Deut. 6:16).

God is just, and is the Judge of all the earth. Israel had brought suit against Him; the case would be heard and judgment executed. God said to Moses, “Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel; and take in your hand the rod with which you struck the Nile, and go” (Ex. 17:5, RSV).

God's command brings drama to the scene. “Pass on before the people” may mean simply to go on ahead of them, but it also suggests that the people were aware of Moses' going.<sup>4</sup> Moses goes ahead to meet with God. He does not go as an accused criminal, but as the judge of Israel, bearing in his hand the rod of judgment. The stroke of that rod had turned the Nile River to blood, judging the gods of Egypt. With him Moses takes a number of the elders of Israel. They make up a court of judges and witnesses; their presence is necessary because of the legal formality of the situation.<sup>5</sup>

The rod of Moses was unique in power and authority, for it represented the judgment of God Himself. But a rod was the usual symbol of judicial authority. Our term “fascist” comes from the Roman fasces, the bundle of rods carried by the ancient Roman lictors to represent their office. A man found guilty of a crime in Israel could be sentenced to lie down before the judge and be beaten. The law limited the number of strokes he could receive to forty (Deut. 25:1–3).

The people well understood the symbol of the rod in the hand of Moses, their judge. They had seen the Nile run red when Moses brought down the rod on it. What judgment would come if Moses now lifted his rod against them? The prophet Isaiah saw the rod of God’s judgment falling on the Gentiles:

*The LORD will cause men to hear his majestic voice and will make them see his arm coming down with raging anger and consuming fire, with cloudburst, thunderstorm and hail. The voice of the LORD will shatter Assyria; with his scepter he will strike them down. Every stroke the LORD lays on them with his punishing rod will be to the music of tambourines and harps. (Isa. 30:30–32)*

At the command of God, Moses does raise the rod of judgment, but what follows is one of the most amazing incidents in Scripture. God said, “Behold, I will stand before thee there upon the rock in Horeb; and thou shalt smite the rock” (Ex. 17:6, KJV). 6 In the Old Testament, God did not stand before men; men stood before God. In Deuteronomy the litigants in a law case were summoned to stand before the Lord and before the priests and judges (Deut. 19:17).

“Before the face” of Moses the judge, with his rod uplifted, stands the God of Israel. The Lord stands in the prisoner’s dock. Moses cannot strike into the heart of God’s shekinah glory. God commands that he strike the rock. But the rock is identified with God in the song of Moses: “Oh, praise the greatness of our God! He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just” (Deut. 32:3–4, 31).

In the same psalms that commemorate this Massah-Meribah trial, the name “Rock” is used for God: “the Rock of our salvation” (Ps. 78:15, 20, 35; 95:1). God, the Rock, identifies Himself with the rock by standing on it. Israel would put God on trial for breaking His covenant with their fathers. God stands in the place of the accused, and the penalty of the judgment is inflicted.

Is God, then, guilty? No, it is the people who are guilty. In rebellion they have refused to trust the faithfulness of God. Yet God, the Judge, bears the judgment; He receives the blow that their rebellion deserves. The law must be satisfied: if God’s people are to be spared, He must bear their punishment.

In Rutenborn’s play, God is tried, found guilty, and sentenced “to become a human being, a wanderer on earth, deprived of his rights, homeless, hungry, thirsty. He himself shall die! And lose a son, and suffer the agonies of fatherhood, and when at last he dies, he shall be disgraced and ridiculed.”

So we rebels cry out in our rage. But God in His perfect righteousness has done more than the blasphemy of our cursing dares to demand. Isaiah declares, “In all their distress he too was distressed, and the angel of his presence saved them. In his love and mercy he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old” (Isa. 63:9).

Through the Old Testament there flows a stream of mercy that has its source at the throne of God. The Shepherd of Israel is the King of love, a God full of mercy and truth. The God who stands upon the rock is the God who spared Abraham’s beloved son Isaac from the sacrificial knife with the promise, “The LORD will provide” (Gen. 22:14). God’s redemption of His rebellious people must be more than an act of liberation; it must be an act of atoning love.

In His own Son, God came to bear our condemnation. What amazement, what awe Moses must have felt as he struck the rock of God! In God’s due time that symbol was made reality. God “did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all” (Rom. 8:32). At the cross, the Son of God took the place of His condemned people and bore the stroke of judgment. Paul rightly says of Israel in the wilderness that they “drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ” (1 Cor. 10:4). John tells us that Jesus stood in the Temple on the last great day of the feast of tabernacles and called, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me. And let him drink, who believes in me. As the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him” (John 7:38, NIV margin).

When Moses struck the rock, a stream of life-giving water poured out into the desert. When Jesus was crucified, John tells us that blood and water poured from His side (John 19:34). In reminding us of the water as well as the blood, John recalls for us the cry of Jesus at the feast. At Calvary there flowed from His heart the streams of living water. The water that Christ gives is the water of the Holy Spirit (John 7:38–39). The breath of the risen Christ symbolized the gift of the Spirit (John 20:22–23); so does the water that flowed with the blood of the Crucified. The Spirit of life is given through Christ’s death.

We do not wonder that Moses was judged severely for striking the rock a second time, when he had been told to speak to it (Num. 20:7–13). Only once, at His appointed time, does God bear the stroke of our doom.

The God who is the Rock of Israel is the Savior, the God of mercy who bears His own judgment for the sin of His people. The people had cried in the accusation of unbelief, “Is the LORD among us or not?” (Ex. 17:7). Yes, the Lord was among them, among them in a way they could not have imagined. There He stood upon the rock; not only among them, but in their place, bearing their condemnation. Before God gave His covenant at Sinai, He pledged His presence at Calvary.

The history of God’s redemption moves from grace to grace. The grace of God’s promise to the patriarchs and the grace of His exodus deliverance point toward

the ultimate grace to come in Jesus Christ. This is apparent in the prophetic overview of the history of redemption found in Deuteronomy (30:1– 10). Moses commanded the tribes of Israel to divide into two vast assemblies after they entered the land. Half the tribes were to assemble on Mount Gerizim and recite all the blessings God would bring upon them as they kept His covenant (Deut. 27:12; 28:1–14). The other half were to stand on Mount Ebal and recite the curses that would rest on them if they were disobedient (Deut. 27:13; 28:15–68). We then learn that these were not simply two possibilities, but that both would be realized. At the beginning of chapter 30, we see that Moses declared what would come to pass after both the blessings and the curses were poured out. The people would then be scattered in captivity among the nations, but as they turned again to the Lord, he would not only restore them to their land, but “The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live” (Deut. 30:6).

This structure spans the whole of biblical history. Israel did, indeed, receive the blessings God had promised. When King Solomon blessed the people at the dedication of the Temple, he declared, “Praise be to the LORD, who has given rest to his people Israel just as he promised. Not one word has failed of all the good promises he gave through his servant Moses” (1 Kings 8:56).

This same King Solomon, however, built shrines to other gods in Jerusalem to accommodate the idolatry of his heathen wives. After his death, his kingdom was divided. Israel in the north and then Judah in the south sank into idolatry and apostasy. The prophets warned of the rising storm of the judgments to come, but the people mocked their doomsaying. The Assyrians destroyed Samaria and carried Israel into captivity. The Babylonian empire brought the same fate on Judah. Jerusalem was put to the torch, its walls broken down, the Temple destroyed. Judgment, total and devastating, had followed blessing.

Yet God’s promises were not forgotten. The prophets who warned of disaster looked forward to a time to come: the “latter days” after the blessing and the curse. God would spare a remnant, restore them to the land from their captivity, and renew His covenant with them in a glory that could not be imagined.

The outline of the history of Israel in Deuteronomy 30 became the burden of the prophets. They proclaimed God’s judgment, but after judgment, the glory of God’s work of redemption, climaxed in the last days. The royal grace of God, the Rock, would triumph in the salvation of His people. God’s triumph would be the work of a greater Prophet than Moses; it would be the work of the Lord’s Anointed.

## Study Questions

1. What two things did God give Israel at Sinai, and why are they so important?
2. What did Moses find when he came down from Mount Sinai with the stone tablets? What was his reaction?

3. Moses pleaded with God for his people. What was his plea?
4. Read Romans 9:3–4. How is Paul similar to Moses in this passage?
5. God proposed an alternative plan to removing Moses' name from His book. What was it?
6. Explain: "The Angel of the Lord was theophanous."
7. Why do we tend to think that having "God at the center of our lives . . . is decidedly too close"?
8. What is at the heart of God's covenant?
9. Did God allow Moses to see His glory?
10. How does Christ fulfill both the law and the worship of Sinai?
11. Read Deuteronomy 8:2–5. Highlight the elements pertaining to education in this passage. What lessons did God's people learn?
12. "The instructional content of the wilderness episodes pointed forward as well as upward." Explain.
13. Read John 3:14–15 and compare to Numbers 21:4–9. What significant parallels do you see?
14. What is so amazing about God's statement to Moses in Exodus 17:6?
15. Explain in your own words how "the history of God's redemption moves from grace to grace."

### Application Questions

1. Review your answers to study questions 3 and 4. What was Moses and Paul's plea with God for sinners? Does your life exhibit a self-sacrificing love for sinners? Why, or why not?
2. How does Christ plead for sinners?
3. Is God at the center of your life, or would that be too close for comfort? In what particular areas does God make you feel uncomfortable? Why?
4. Is fellowship with God at the heart of your being?
5. Read Exodus 34:9. What is it about Moses' prayer that makes it "one of the most beautiful prayers in the Bible"? How does it compare to your prayers?
6. Have you ever wandered through the desert? What curriculum did God teach you and with what results? Give examples.
7. When the Israelites were bitten by poisonous snakes in the desert, God gave them a way of escape. However, some Israelites refused to look at the bronze snake and died. Others looked at it and lived. What are you to look at for healing from your sin?
8. "The Spirit of life is given through Christ's death." This is a paradox. Why must Christ die in order that you might have the Spirit of life?
9. Is your life characterized by complaining? If so, what is at the core of your problem?