Water from the Rock

“I want to talk to the manager!” These 7 words have ruined the day of many employees. Unhappy customers who are unable to resolve a complaint usually want their issue escalated to a higher authority. Sometimes their complaints are legitimate because they received poor service. More often their dissatisfaction stems from unrealistic expectations or a failure (or refusal) to understand an employee’s explanation. During my career I was blessed to supervise mostly competent employees so my encounters with disgruntled customers were limited. When I did get involved in a dispute I mostly listened before drawing any conclusions. It was always a balancing act trying to satisfy a customer while maintaining the dignity of the employee. I often found that the customers I dealt with would get in the habit of later calling me to handle routine matters. It’s human nature to want to deal with the highest available person in the food chain. We learn to bypass the monkey and go directly to the organ grinder. In our study of Exodus chapter 17 we see that the Israelites routinely preferred to deal with Moses rather than with God.

The chapter begins in a similar fashion to chapter 16 as the Israelites are complaining again, this time due to a lack of water. They were once again traveling and had camped at Rephidim which is thought to have been near Mt. Sanai. Instead of praying to God, they demanded that Moses provide them with water and again accused him of bringing them into the desert to die. Moses cried out to God for help not with water but with the people. God told Moses to take some of the elders with him along with his staff and strike the rock at Horeb where God would provide water. Moses named the place the Massah and Meribah which mean temptation and strife. God had once again tested the patience and commitment of the Israelites and they were found wanting (see Ps. 81:7).

Next the Israelites were the victims of an unprovoked attack by the Amalekites. This was the first battle Israel’s army fought and occurred perhaps 2 months after they left Egypt. God had not allowed them to take the short route to Canaan which would have quickly led them into Philistine territory. After spending some time in the desert, He must have deemed them worthy of engaging in war. We are introduced to Joshua who led them in battle as Moses stood on a hill to encourage the army. Hur is also mentioned as helping Aaron minister to Moses on the hilltop. Hur was apparently a leader in the Israelite community as he and Aaron were assigned to oversee the Israelites while Moses was on Mt. Sanai with God. Moses again used his staff as an instrument of God’s power to urge on the Israelites during the battle. Because of their of their dishonorable conduct during the battle God resolved to blot out the memory of Amalek which is thought to mean that they would disappear as a people (see Dt. 25:17-18). They did disappear but first had continual conflicts with the Israelites for many years (see. Jdg. 3:13 and 6:2-5). Matthew Henry noted that there is no mention of the Amalekites after they were defeated by David in 1st Samuel chapter 30. After the Amalekites were defeated, Moses built an alter to commemorate the victory naming it “The Lord is my Banner”.

While God used Moses as his instrument many times, Moses continually gave God the glory for what was accomplished. Despite this, the Israelites repeatedly looked to Moses as their deliverer. There existed among the Israelites a fear of God that went beyond reverence. As we will soon read in chapter 20, they trembled with fear at Mt. Sanai and asked Moses to speak to them as a surrogate for God. This indirect relationship continued and was symbolized by having a priest manage the sacrifices that people brought to God. There was a veil in the Tabernacle and the Temple which separated man from God. When Jesus died on the cross, the veil was torn (see Matt. 27:51). This symbolizes the completed work of Jesus on the cross atoning for our sins*.* We no longer have a need for a high priest to petition God on our behalf. *“Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.” (Heb. 4:16).* Having said that, we still must maintain our reverence for God and not allow ourselves to assume a more familiar relationship. While there is nothing wrong with contemporary worship, some have interpreted it as authorizing a more casual approach to worship where God is viewed as more a friend and less a father.