

Followers of the Way

The Battle Belongs to the LORD

STEVE CAMPBELL 26-02-23

Ex 17:1-16

From the moment the Israelites left Egypt, the LORD went before them, providing guidance, protection and sustenance for their journey. However, He also tested them, because He wanted a people who would trust Him unreservedly, and as we know they failed miserably, time after time!

The LORD had visited Egypt with Ten Plagues, yet not one of them touched the Israelites – including the death of the firstborn, which they miraculously escaped through the blood of the Passover lamb. They left Egypt that night, plundering the people before they went; walked through the Red Sea on dry land while the Egyptian army was drowned; and they received water to drink, and manna and quail to eat. Yet they still did not trust in the LORD! All the way they grumbled against Moses and Aaron, but of course it was really the LORD they were grumbling against (v.2). They experienced miracle after miracle, and you would think they should have known by now that God could be trusted. But no! Just as God was testing them to see if they had faith in Him, the people were also putting God to the test, ‘they tested the LORD saying, ‘Is the LORD among us or not?’ (v.7b).

So OK, they had travelled some distance in the heat of the desert, they camped at Rephidim, on the south west Sinai peninsula, and found no water there. We normally read these narratives from God’s perspective, because we have the luxury of seeing the big picture and know the outcome. However, if we read it from the perspective of the Israelites, who were living through it, we may have a better understanding of their reaction. They were hot, tired and thirsty; they were worried about their children and livestock; and when you are facing a crisis you tend to go into survival mode.

But instead of seeking the LORD through prayer, as they ought to have done, the people grumbled, they complained, they quarrelled with Moses. As he was the LORD’s representative, by extension, they were quarrelling with the LORD Himself! This showed a lack of trust in the LORD who, at the time of the Passover, gave this assurance – ‘Obey these instructions as a lasting ordinance for you and your descendants. When you enter the land that the LORD will give you as he **promised**, observe this ceremony’ (Ex 12:24-25).

Even though the Israelites did not pass the test, the LORD was still gracious to them, and instructed Moses how to get water (vv.5-6). Moses was to go as the LORD commanded, with his staff in hand and take along some of the elders as witnesses. These men would see with their own eyes the miracle that was about to take place and report it back to the people. The staff that Moses took, the one with which he had struck the Nile, and it turned to blood, had no magic properties about it. It was a normal wooden staff used by shepherds, but it symbolised God’s presence and power with Moses.

Back in Exodus 4, when Moses encountered the living God in a burning bush, he argued back and forth about his call to go back to Egypt and deliver his people. He asked, ‘What if they do not believe me or listen to me?’ Then the LORD said, ‘What is that in your hand?’ It

was his staff, the ordinary tool of a shepherd, yet when given over to the LORD can be used to perform extraordinary deeds.

This is a good lesson for us: we don't need to wait until we are more educated, better equipped, more fully gifted or hear a direct call from God, before we can serve Him. We only need to dedicate to Him what we already have, and He will do the rest. David didn't need Saul's armour, only his staff and sling, to defeat the giant Goliath, because he came against him in the name of the LORD Almighty.

Moses obeyed the LORD – he took his staff and then, with the elders, went to the rock at Horeb, where the LORD would stand before him. Now Horeb usually refers to the mountain where Moses received the Law, but it probably refers to a larger geographical area rather than just that one mountain peak. Moses struck the rock, water gushed out and the people's thirst was quenched. The Israelites had failed the test and they weren't going to forget about it. The place was named Massah and Meribah, meaning testing and quarrelling. Years later, the author of Psalm 95 looked back at this incident and wrote:

Today, if only you would hear his voice,
 'Do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah,
 as you did that day at Massah in the wilderness,
 where your ancestors tested me;
 they tried me, though they had seen what I did.
 For forty years I was angry with that generation;
 I said, "They are a people whose hearts go astray,
 and they have not known my ways."
 So I declared on oath in my anger,
 "They shall never enter my rest." (Ps 95:7-11)

Naming a place after an historic event is quite common. You've perhaps heard of the Percy French song, 'Where the Mountains of Mourne Sweep Down to the Sea.' It refers to the picturesque seaside town of Newcastle, Co. Down, overlooking the Irish Sea, while the majestic Mourne Mountains form a wonderful backdrop. There are many beautiful and invigorating walks including one along the *Bloody Bridge*.

Why give a beauty spot such an ugly name? It refers to an historic event in 1641 when the native Irish rose up against the English and Scottish settlers who had arrived earlier in the century. Many were slaughtered at that time, and it's said that so many were killed and thrown over the bridge near Newcastle that the river turned red.

After failing to trust God for their provision, the people were tested again regarding His protection. The Amalekites attacked them as they camped at Rephidim. Amalek was a grandson of Esau, Jacob's twin brother, and conflict between these two unidentical twins began in the womb and continued throughout their history.

The Amalekites were a nomadic people dwelling across the Sinai peninsula. The sight of up to two million Israelites and their livestock arriving in their territory rang alarm bells. The grazing land would not support both them and these intruders, so that's probably why they attacked. That's the human explanation, but God's perspective is different. He uses both the Amalekites to test the Israelites, but also uses His people to punish the Amalekites. God was preparing a people through whom the Saviour of the world would come, so Amalekite attempts to destroy Israel put them in a deadly position. Moses, looking back on this 40 years later, says, 'Remember what 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. When the LORD your God gives you rest from all the enemies around you in the land he is giving you to possess as an inheritance, you shall blot out the name of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!' (Dt 25:17-19).

Balaam would also deliver a prophetic warning against them, "Then Balaam saw Amalek and spoke his message: 'Amalek was first among the nations, but their end will be utter destruction.'" (Numbers 24:20)

This was ultimately fulfilled by the tribe of Simeon, where we read in 1 Chronicles 4:43, 'They killed the remaining Amalekites who had escaped'.

In the meantime, the Amalekites were attacking Israel and God was going to display His divine protection. This time Moses took the initiative, commanding Joshua to choose some of their men to fight the enemy on the ground, while he, Aaron and Hur would ascend the hill with the staff of God in his hands.

We see here the human and divine aspects of spiritual warfare. Joshua who, as we know was a great military leader and went on to spearhead the conquest of the Promised Land, fought the battle at the human level. Whereas Moses fought it in the spiritual realm. Ascending the hill did not mean he was any closer to God, but he could be seen by the army below, who would take courage from him. Again, the staff was not a magic wand but simply a symbol of God's power and presence. Although the passage does not specifically mention prayer, the act of lifting one's hands to heaven was the usual posture for prayer.

E.G. Psalm 28:2 'Hear my cry for mercy as I call to you for help, as I lift up my hands towards your Most Holy Place.'

1 Timothy 2:8 'I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing.'

So, Moses, assisted by Aaron and Hur, held the staff of God towards heaven in prayer. As long as he did so, Joshua and the Israelites prevailed against the Amalekites but when he grew tired and his hands dropped, their enemy started to prevail against them. They sat Moses on a stone and Aaron and Hur held up his hands until sunset and the battle was won. Verse 13 says, 'Joshua overcame the Amalekite army with the sword.' But he only did so because Moses kept praying. The LORD gave them the victory because the battle belongs to the LORD!

Our battles are fought and won, not just on our feet but on our knees. The enemies we face may be different from that which Moses and the Israelites faced, but the weapons we need are the same. We sing, 'every prayer a powerful weapon', and it's true.

How is your prayer life? There are some people for whom prayer is as natural as breathing, and we thank God for those real prayer warriors. But if your experience is anything like mine then you'll struggle with prayer. We can learn and take courage from this story – just as Moses needed the support of Aaron and Hur, so we need the support of one another, in prayer and in every aspect of our Christian walk together. The battle belongs to the LORD and He made sure Moses, Joshua and all the Israelites knew it (v.14).

We are all familiar with Joshua who Fit the Battle round Jericho and the Walls came Tumbling Down! But that was not his real name; Hoshea was his given name, but in Numbers 13:16 we are told Moses named him Joshua. Why did he do this? Scripture does not offer a reason, but there may be a clue in the meaning of the names. Hoshea means salvation, whereas Joshua means Yahweh saves. Could it be that following the battle with the Amalekites, Moses did not want Joshua to be tempted to take the credit for victory

himself ,but to glorify the LORD who gave the enemy into their hands? In the future conquest of the Promised Land Joshua's name would be a constant reminder to all of where their salvation comes from – the battle belongs to the LORD.

But yet a greater battle was fought and won by another Joshua, better known as Jesus, when He took on the final enemy and won the victory through His own death and resurrection! In light of that truth we can face anything the devil may throw at us and stand strong, because in the end we know – the battle belongs to the LORD!