



The Book of **Exodus**

11. The Lord is my Banner **Exodus 17**

In 1881, Captain Neil Curry set sail from Liverpool, for North America. They were about 1,500 miles out from land when a fire raced through the ship. All 36 people managed to get into the lifeboats before the ship went up in flames, but soon they were dying of thirst. Water, water everywhere, but not a drop to drink! Seven of the crew were already unconscious, Curry wrote later, when everyone else had this marvellous dream. We dreamed, he said, (that) the water beneath us had turned from the blue of the sea to green. (I dreamed that) I managed to muster up strength to let out a container. I tasted that water, and it was fresh! Lo and behold, when he woke up a short while later, their boats were drifting into a patch of green water, right in the middle of the blue ocean! Captain Curry reached down a cup and tasted the water. It was fresh! Revived and strengthened, they rowed on. Within the week, they sighted land, and everyone was saved!

That's the kind of miracle God's promises are for us: a patch of fresh-water green on an icy-blue ocean of fear and anxiety.

I don't quite know where that story came from, but it is a timely reminder that we have a God who comes to the rescue of people who trust Him – and sometimes to people that don't. Last week we looked at the people of Israel's lack of faith as their food ran out. We also saw how that was kind of understandable as in human terms they didn't stand a chance in the desert.

The thing about trusting God is that once people get hold of the notion that He is a God who can be trusted if people will only place their trust in Him, he ups the ante. It proves two things – not to God but to us – firstly just how far our faith goes and secondly the amount we truly can trust God.

The story tonight involves this place Rephidim. I don't know whether it was called that before or after they got there because Rephidim means support. But at Rephidim they ran out of water and there was no way of getting hold of it.

Now you would have thought that they would have thought of the Red sea, the pillars of cloud and fire and manna and said "Let's ask God". Of course not – they grumbled - 2 They complained to Moses and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses answered, "Why are you complaining? Why are you putting the LORD to the test?" 3 But the people were very thirsty and continued to complain to Moses. They said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt? To kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?"

4 Moses prayed earnestly to the LORD and said, "What can I do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me." And this time they were pretty angry and Moses as their leader and effectively God's representative got the brunt of it.

Being concerned the first time is understandable, but they'd seen so much of God's goodness that Moses was quite right to say they were testing God beyond reasonable.

But again, I can't just stand here and say how wise I am and how daft they are, because I've done exactly the same. I know what god can do. I've seen it in my own life, but I've still found myself to lay it all at the Lord's feet and have peace about a difficult situation. I'm sure that may be your experience too.

What happened next is also my experience. I can remember saying that the Bible has the word "grace" written all over it without it being actually there in black and white. They tested God, but in His grace and mercy again made a way where there seemed to be no way – and they got their water

but the springs of water got the names “temptation” and “quarrel” because they did that with Moses and with the Lord.

One of the things I learnt as a teacher and as a minister is that some people get it first time they are told – others need to be told the same thing again and again and they do eventually learn.

From Egypt to the Red Sea to the Wilderness of Sin and now to Rephidim, the people of Israel had learned that they needed to trust God as it was the only way they were going to survive their journey into the wilderness.

Rephidim was in terms of survival in the wilderness a turning point. They pushed Moses and the Lord to the limit – and then they were attacked by the Amalekites. We've all heard about them before. I've preached on Saul's failure to fully destroy them. This is Israel's first encounter.

“These were a nomadic people descended from Jacob's brother Esau. Amalek, one of six sons of Eliphaz and a grandson of Jacob, is listed as one of the chiefs descended from Eliphaz in the land of Edom. Due to the limited amount of food and water in the wilderness, their tribes ranged over a wide area. It may be that the presence of a large population of people wandering in the vicinity of their borders was seen as a dangerous threat to their existence, so they attacked. (Brian Morgan)

And what do we notice from this passage. They didn't complain, they didn't try to blame Moses. They didn't have time to do much other than fight even though in the few months since Egypt they had no experience of battle. They had to trust God! And now we see why there was a Red Sea and a pillar of cloud and fire, and manna and water from the rock. When it came to the crunch, even the densest member of the Israelite race had got the idea that they had to trust God. The Amalekites were better trained and better equipped.

9 Moses said to Joshua, "Pick out some men to go and fight the Amalekites tomorrow. I will stand on top of the hill holding the stick that God told me to carry." 10 Joshua did as Moses commanded him and went out to fight the Amalekites, while Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. 11 As long as Moses held up his arms, the Israelites won, but when he put his arms down, the Amalekites started winning. 12 When Moses' arms grew tired, Aaron and Hur brought a stone for him to sit on, while they stood beside him and held up his arms, holding them steady until the sun went down. 13 In this way Joshua totally defeated the Amalekites.

It's a strange story. They had to fight but how the battle went, depended on how much Moses could keep his staff raised. What was going on?

In those days as in traditional armies for millennia, soldiers fought under a banner which was a symbol of the authority under which they fought. As long as the soldiers could see their banner or standard, they knew they were still in the battle. If the banner was captured or it disappeared, they knew they had lost and either had to surrender or run!

Israel hardly had an army let alone a banner. But they did have a symbol of authority – a staff which when raised in Moses hand became a potent symbol of the power of God - it could turn into a snake, it touched the red Sea and parted it, it produced water from the rock. Well, it wasn't actually the staff – God did it but it was the symbol of His authority.

And Moses held up the staff to show the authority of God and the Israelites prevailed. But he got tired of holding it and when he flagged, the Amalekites got stronger so Aaron and Hur made sure that he didn't put his arms down!

Moses saw the significance of the staff and when he built the altar at that place he called it Yaweh Nissi (Jehovah Nissi) – The Lord is my Banner. They didn't have a standard for the battle, but the arms and the staff pointing up to heaven pointed to where their authority to do battle was coming from and where the power to win the battle was coming from. To lower his arms meant that he was no longer pointing His trust towards God

What can we learn from this? If we are looking for victory in our lives and seeing God's power over those things that are in the way – whether that be sin, or problems in life – we need to trust our God totally. He needs to be our banner.

Poem by William Cowper:

Jehovah Nissi – The Lord is my Banner

By whom was David taught
To aim the deadly blow,
When he Goliath fought,
And laid the Gittite low?
Nor sword nor spear the stripling took,
But chose a pebble from the brook.

'Twas Israel's God and King
Who sent him to the fight;
Who gave him strength to sling,
And skill to aim aright.
Ye feeble saints, your strength endures,
Because young David's God is yours.

Who order'd Gideon forth,
To storm the invaders' camp.
With arms of little worth,
A pitcher and a lamp?
The trumpets made his coming known
And all the host was overthrown.

Oh! I have seen the day,
When with a single word,
God helping me to say,
"My trust is in the Lord,"
My soul hath quell'd a thousand foes
Fearless of all that could oppose.

But unbelief, self-will,
Self-righteousness, and pride,
How often do they steal
My weapon from my side!
Yet David's Lord, and Gideon's friend,
Will help his servant to the end.

One of the trends of recent years has been the raising of hands in worship. It comes more naturally to some rather than others. It's a scriptural thing to do – you'll find plenty of references to it in the Psalms. What Moses was doing here was effectively signifying that his trust was in God – he was surrendering the situation into God's hands, trusting Him for the victory. In fact, to most people who raise hands, that's what they are doing – signifying that God's name is to be magnified and our minds and bodies surrendered to His will and purpose.

And as Yahweh was the banner, the battle came under His authority and they were winning. As we trust our God and are surrendered to Him – we will prevail – the battle may be hard but we will prevail and Jesus will be honoured.

But figuratively speaking, as our arms drop, as we cease to trust and take our eyes off Jesus, the enemy prevails.

I was always hopeless at catching when I played ball games when I was young. The advice was "keep your eye on the ball". If I did, I caught it. If I didn't, I missed. It's the same with trusting God. If I fully trust Him, I prevail. If I don't trust, or trust a bit or 90% trust; I drop the ball. Simple as that.

And I know from my own Christian experience, that some of the most difficult times I have ever had as a Christian are when I took my eyes off the ball and did not trust Jesus fully.

Are you struggling with your faith or some spiritual or personal issue this evening? Is your eye on the ball? Are you walking in the Spirit or have your arms started to flag. We've come to the right place – into the presence of Jesus, around His table. Let's allow His Spirit to minister to us, that we may find the strength and that Holy Spirit trust, that we may see ways where there seem to be no

ways, that we may prevail when the battle looks hard or even lost and have hope as we look back and see that we have a God who has never failed us even though we fail Him so much – and like Israel, in His love He deals graciously with us as we come again in humility before Him.

Let's pray.

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