

Exodus 17 A rock and a rout

Trust that God will provide

So what did you make, earlier on this week, of **Boris Johnson's** provisional road-map back to normality?

I think I was disappointed - and have been all along, actually - by the so many rather inappreciative responses he got. No matter how quickly or how slowly he proposes that things should move, **someone is always shouting** that he has prioritised the wrong groups of people or sectors of the economy. When he has had to impose lockdowns, he's accused of *both* over-reacting *and* not reacting fast enough.

But, odd though everything was, back at the end of last March and on into April, we have sort of settled into what we've all called the "**new normal**". I suspect it's going to be very difficult for some people - maybe even some of us - to make the leap back into meeting in the chapel again.

Of course, with restrictions starting to be relaxed over the next few months, it really is time that we take the set of decisions that we're being faced with. It really isn't good for us to think that we can continue indefinitely meeting on screens, cosy on our own settees, and able to just nip out for a cuppa any time we like. In the next few weeks we will need not just to decide, but to actually commit ourselves, to making another substantial change to another, but *different again*, new normal.

It is the only time since the start of the church 50 years ago that we will have such a good opportunity to think through everything we do, and decide what we want to pick up precisely where we left it a year ago, what we want to *not* pick up again at all, and what we want to start doing or start doing *differently*.

It will be a *new new normal*. And not every one of us will like every aspect of it. Once again, it could be quite a challenge for us. A year ago, we just had to accept what we could cobble together, whereas now we have the luxury of falling out over personal preferences. Personally, I'd prefer we *didn't!*

But then again, that is the way with "new normals". That is what we're seeing in the passage we read a few minutes back. The Hebrews are being introduced to a new normal here. They've had more than four centuries of life in Egypt, with gradually increasing oppression, but at least a continuity and familiarity with the situation. But now it is different.

First of all, there was the traumatic set of confrontations between Moses and Pharaoh - those **10 plagues** and such. And then there was the sudden evacuation from Egypt. There was that jaw-dropping moment when they **passed through the Red Sea** ... which then closed behind them on the heads of Pharaoh's crack troops and drowned the lot of them.

After the obvious celebrations, they're now at the start of a new life, and a

new lifestyle to go with it. And it's only a month or two when the *new* normal starts to become evident, here in this chapter. **The two conflicts at Rephidim set the tone for the Hebrews' next 40 years.**

Instead of the predictability of the Nile delta, they're out in the wilderness. Semi-desert life is the new normal, and with it a realisation of how desperately they depend on water for just basic survival.

And instead of being an oppressed people-group within a big nation, they are now out in the wilderness *on their own*. In this new normal, they will be *literally* battling to survive, too.

Oh, and remember that thing about Aussie driving, and **choosing your rut** carefully. This is the Hebrews' new normal not for a mere year, but the next few decades. They will need to learn to trust in God in new ways. Today, we're looking at two of his first interventions to preserve them: **title**.

- **A rock (1-7)**

So the people are somewhere down the **Western coast** of the Sinai peninsula, we reckon, but probably starting to move inland, into what is most likely even more arid territory. Relatively short movements, because they weren't experienced wilderness travellers.

All the congregation of the people of Israel moved on from the wilderness of Sin by stages, according to the commandment of the LORD, and camped at Rephidim, ...

(Exodus 17:1)

But they are becoming accustomed to one of the worst features of this kind of land:

... but there was no water for the people to drink.

(Exodus 17:1)

Now you might remember that we've had this problem before, just a couple of chapters back:

They went three days in the wilderness and found no water. When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter; ...

(Exodus 15:22-23)

God had an answer to that problem of bitter water, of course:

And he cried to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a log, and he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet.

(Exodus 15:25)

But now the problem, you could argue, was worse. *No* water. However that

log thing worked, it's not going to work here! So you can perhaps predict the response.

Therefore the people quarrelled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink."

(Exodus 17:2)

"Quarrelling", as words go, is up a level from simply "grumbling". Grumbling could be done behind your back, like people at the back of the church members' meeting who mutter something you can't quite hear at the front. Whereas *quarrelling* is much more **in your face**.

And I have to say that I understand how this escalates. A huge group of people, hot and very bothered, with no water in sight ... the situation could get very ugly very quickly as tempers fray out of sheer desperation. And I'm not sure that Moses necessarily answers with total calm, either:

And Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?"

(Exodus 17:2)

But it's a very good and necessary point that he is making about when we get hot and bothered about stuff. Be careful that when you complain, that you're not actually levelling an accusation towards God himself.

I think we see that particularly when a complaint is directed against something comfortably distant, like the government. Think back a few years, to when **Michael Gove** was in charge of Education. Or think back a few decades, when **Margaret Thatcher** was taking on the Unions. Immense hostility, some of it very pointed and personal, was vented on those people. On reflection, I think I joined in too much with the groundswell of discontent at Michael Gove's handling of his role at the time.

But if we can only spit out the names of those people with contempt, how are we ever going to pray for them properly, as individuals or simply just as ministers of State? Have we ever considered that if we have very far from perfect leadership it is because we are very far from perfect citizens, and God is maybe giving us the leadership that we deserve?

The next time you refer to a politician - or maybe a preacher - by surname only, is it because they are a notable figure in history (whom you might know very little about) - Disraeli, Gladstone, Spurgeon? - or because they are someone you actually want to subtly publicly despise? - though you can probably hear something of that distaste from the way it leaves your lips: *Thatcher, Trump*.

But, coming back to Moses, who was, after all, simply doing what he had been told - remember back a verse:

All the congregation of the people of Israel moved on from the wilderness of Sin by stages, according to the commandment of the LORD, ...

(Exodus 17:1)

... do you see how therefore a criticism of *that* leadership is directly a criticism of God himself. And that, we have to say, is a dangerous, unwise, unholy thing to do. And yet that is what angry people do. And they also tend to make very stupid statements, too, that, if you play it back to them later, they would probably want to deny if they could, it seems so infantile and petulant:

But the people thirsted there for water, and the people grumbled against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?"

(Exodus 17:3)

I mean, what nonsense that is! That was Moses' or God's purpose? Seriously? But, faced with that kind of attitude, don't you identify with Moses' increasing desperation, too?

So Moses cried to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me."

(Exodus 17:4)

But God has an answer. He has *another* answer, actually. The thirst problem is similar but not identical to the previous one, but God has plenty more strings to his bow, too. There's a hint of that in the initial words:

And the LORD said to Moses, "Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel, and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go."

(Exodus 17:5)

Remember that Moses has done some pretty spectacular stuff with that staff before. That's the staff that he tossed on the floor, and it became a snake. That's the staff that he stretched out over the river Nile, and turned it into blood (whether you take that as literal blood or something that looks close enough to blood to use that description ... either are pretty miraculous!). And that's the staff that Moses employed when the Red Sea parted:

"Lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the people of Israel may go through the sea on dry ground."

(Exodus 14:16)

Do you see how that might have encouraged Moses? "I wonder what God is going to do using this staff *this* time!" And here *is* what God does with it.

"Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink." And Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel.

(Exodus 17:6)

Goodness, isn't that quite an understatement to finish this incident off! "And Moses did so". Sorted! Simple! Next?

But don't run on quite so quickly. Stop and think a moment. There are lessons to learn here, before we move along.

Expect to face lots of different problems in life

There may well be recurring themes in your life, just as there are going to be recurring themes here as the Israelites are living in the wilderness. There can be good and comfortable times, such as when they camped by the oasis of Elim, with 12 springs and 70 palm trees. And there can be uncomfortable and challenging times. There can be bitter water. Or there can be no water.

Folks, in this world, we should *expect* problems, of various kinds. This world is not our home, and we shouldn't expect to feel ultimately comfortable here. Just think of the apostle Paul's life summary:

... on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; ...
(2 Corinthians 11:26)

Folks, *expect* problems of all sorts. Expect frustrations. Expect disappointments. But expect, too that God will prove dependable.

Remember that God has all sorts of answers

Bitter water! This is undrinkable! This situation is impossible! Until ...

And he cried to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a log, and he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet.
(Exodus 15:25)

No water. This situation is impossible! Until ...

"... you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, ..." And Moses did so, ...
(Exodus 17:6)

Folks, don't think that because a situation seems impossible to you, that it is impossible to God. I suspect that he has so many ways of answering our "impossibilities" that we would be speechless if he just started listing a few for us. Our **jaws would drop** to the floor, at least. If God has a problem, it would not be in finding a way to answer our need, but in choosing *between* so many brilliant ways that would all totally answer our need.

Folks, we need to learn to trust in this great God who, if we have put our faith in Jesus Christ, has become our Heavenly Father. And we need to

Remember the lesson

And he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the quarrelling of the people of Israel, and because they tested the LORD by saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

(Exodus 17:7)

"Testing" and "Contention", that's what those names mean in Hebrew. With the intention that they should be not just place names, but continual reminders of what happened there ... what should be avoided in future.

Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, ...

(Psalms 95:7-8)

Even in the NT that same lesson cries out to be applied and heard:

"Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts."

(Hebrews 4:7)

You'd maybe think that one big lesson like this was enough for one chapter. But no. We're not told just how much later this happened, but it's while the people are still at the same place. So presumably not a whole lot later on ... a **totally different** sort of danger.

- **A rout (8-16)**

Then Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim.

(Exodus 17:8)

Of course we understand that that means not a single man, but the tribe that bears this name. No warning. Just, by the looks of it, swooping in out of the dusty wilderness. But look, God has already got an answer worked out. Here's a fine young man ready to lead the battle on behalf of Israel. We haven't heard the name before, up to this point in the story. God had just been getting him ready, behind the scenes. Cometh the hour, cometh the man.

So Moses said to Joshua, "Choose for us men, and go out and fight with Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand."

(Exodus 17:9)

And Joshua, look, if you're maybe inclined to worry about this, notice what I'll have in my hand. That staff, the one that ... yes, I told you all that a few minutes ago. *That* staff again. If *that staff* can handle Pharaoh's - and the *nation* of Egypt's - crack troops, don't you think it's up to the job of handling a marauding desert tribe?

So Joshua did as Moses told him, and fought with Amalek, while Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill.

(Exodus 17:10)

And now we get to that curious bit that I'm sure many of you will have heard of

and thought of as implicit teaching about prayer. In fact, it's the incident that features in that "what various hindrances" hymn we sang earlier, too. But I'm not really convinced that that is really what this is primarily getting at. I think, if we're not careful, that it can lead us into a rather too superstitious way of thinking about how we should pray. But first let's see how things go as we read on, and then we'll come back to this question of prayer.

So what it says here about the battle is quite simple.

Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed, and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed.

(Exodus 17:11)

And what follows is almost a rather cute practicality. It's not just because Moses was old, but because he was human. Just *you* try holding your hands in the air for the length of this talk, and I bet you'll find it hard work!

But Moses' hands grew weary, so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it, while Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side. So his hands were steady until the going down of the sun.

(Exodus 17:12)

And since his hands were steady, when they were held up, Israel prevailed:

And Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the sword.

(Exodus 17:13)

It's followed by a couple of verses saying, once again, *remember* this stuff. *Learn the lessons* of what has happened here. Joshua will need to have the echo of it still ringing in his ears for years and decades to come. Remember what God can do. Remember what God has promised to do in the future, too. Don't just say it memorably, but *write* it - and this is a society, remember, where books and writing were not anything like as widespread as today, so this is to *specialy* note this.

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Write this as a memorial in a book and recite it in the ears of Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven."

(Exodus 17:14)

Even create an altar to remember and celebrate this - rather than to make any sacrifices on.

And Moses built an altar and called the name of it, The LORD Is My Banner, saying, "A hand upon the throne of the LORD! The LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation."

(Exodus 17:15-16)

But come back to this raised hands stuff again. Is that teaching about prayer?

I think I have to concede that *indirectly* it is, of course. Joshua just getting out there and hacking away with his sword is only one side of things.

***Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labour in vain.
Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.***
(Psalms 127:1)

So, as the hymn puts it, quite rightly,

Restraining prayer, we cease to fight

Don't expect things to happen if we do not pray. But that is not the same as saying that prayer *at the precise moment, and for the whole duration* of the event is absolutely imperative. It sounds wonderfully spiritual, but I don't think our instincts about "spirituality" are all that good.

So, first of all, the **picture** we quite possibly have in our minds is of Moses sitting a bit like Little Miss Muffet, with Aaron on one side holding up one of his arms, and Hur on the other side with the other arm. But what is very likely missing? I've already flagged it up.

"Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand."

(Exodus 17:9)

That staff is the symbol of God's power to intervene in the natural affairs of this world: to strike the Nile, to strike the Red Sea, and now to strike the army of Amalek. When Moses stretches out his hand, bearing that staff, God works. That's less about Moses asking, and more about God answering. Not Moses' activity, but God's.

See, I have just a bit of an issue with taking this - or maybe it's about pressing it too far - as a picture of prayer. Because I think it can take us far too close to a superstitious and essentially pagan notion of what prayer is. Let me start by giving you an example from way back.

Most of you know about the cross that Redruth Baptist Church put up on the top of **Carn Brea** each year (apart from 2020, of course). Jenny and I were around, as part of the church youth group, when that cross was first erected on Carn Brea. In those days the castle was semi-derelict, but there was the special provision arranged that they would open it for our use while the cross was there overlooking Redruth.

Honestly, I think the main part of that was that it was a great adventure. We climbed stairways that weren't there by means of ladders. We lit a fire in a grate above which the chimney was blocked off, and filled the room with smoke. The boys shivered in their sleeping bags in that room, while the girls had the room with the extra warmth.

There was a practical point, that there was some fear of vandalism, if the

whole thing were left unguarded ... and that was a convenient premise for our escapade, too.

But then someone suggested that we should make sure that someone was praying all the way through the night. That we should arrange shifts so that prayer was going up at every moment. Whether it was for the protection of the cross, or that its message would permeate Redruth, I don't really know. Someone just *felt* we should do this.

But I think I was awkward even then. It sounds all so spiritual, an all-night prayer vigil, but, I thought, what does it actually achieve that prayer for a specific shorter period can't? So I *didn't* feel that we needed to do this, and I declined to take one of the middle-of-the-night prayer slots. Quite possibly I led a few others down this path of apparent unspirituality, because if I remember right, the person coming up with the idea had to resort to doing the 2am to 5am slots just by themselves.

Now I'm not trying to say there was something actually *wrong* with praying through that night, but I think I do need to question the thinking - or maybe *unthinking* - behind it. First of all, how does it stack up with something Jesus said about prayer?

“And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words.”

(Matthew 6:7)

Why are continual, repeated words better than simply praying the once, sincerely, thoughtfully, reverently, faithfully? I honestly think that I'd find it almost impossible for it not to become pretty mindless, just carrying on praying essentially the same thing, probably trying to phrase it in fifty different ways, just for the sake of there being someone "praying" (I've put it in my notes in quote marks, because I question if this really is very much like real praying) throughout the duration of some arbitrarily-defined period of time. How does this not risk transgressing what Jesus says?

Folks, quantity is not the same as quality.

And think who it is we're praying to? Not some man-made so-called God who needs to be continually flattered and adulated so that they will not just zap you on the spot for a bit of fun. No, we pray to our Heavenly Father. Do you think a human child should be expected to ask Mum or Dad repeatedly, over and over, all afternoon long, *Please cook my dinner this evening?* Shouldn't once be enough? Wouldn't repetition start to grate and tire, after a while? Wouldn't it seem to be more expressive of a *lack* of trust in the love of their parent?

I think it could even be worse than this. I do fear that some Christians approach prayer as if it is almost magic, in practice. As if they are channeling some kind of spiritual power. It's particularly prevalent when you hear people saying that they're "praying against" something.

Actually, stop and think. How many "praying against" things do you see in the Scriptures? I see plenty of praying *for somethings*, but, to be honest, I'm scratching

my head coming up with anything that is prayed *against*.

I think we might be far better employed by thinking much more carefully, if we've become accustomed to praying like that: what should we instead be specifically asking God to *do*, if we want to "pray against" abortion or Coronavirus or exploitative televangelists, just by way of a few examples?

Folks, when we are praying, who are we praying to? Why would our Heavenly Father, who, remember ...

"... your Father knows what you need before you ask him."

(Matthew 6:8)

... why would he insist that you keep yakking at him for five hours, when you can say what needs to be said in five minutes? Don't think in terms of yourself as the noble spiritual warrior, beaming out supernatural power from your raised hands like some cartoon super-hero, or becoming some kind of conduit for divine power to act in this world. Those are actually pretty pagan notions.

Just come to your Heavenly Father, and ask him to do all the heavy lifting, in whatever way *he* thinks best. That's the way, back in today's passage, that the rock becomes a fountain, and the battle becomes a rout.

And actually, that rock, before we finish, is a strange and wonderful picture of how God has intervened in this world. We need to look at that rock with NT eyes - and we'll think some more about how to do that, more generally, next Sunday evening. But about this specific incident, we read:

For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.

(1 Corinthians 10:4)

"Followed" is a bit odd there, but since there was another occasion, at the end of Moses' life, when he once again produced water from a rock, the Jewish tradition was that this rock - the one at Horeb that we read about today - followed them around the wilderness, waiting to be struck again later on. But we put that idea aside for now, and go to the end of the verse, ready for when we break bread together.

The Rock was Christ. What happened back in Exodus 17?

"... you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink."

(Exodus 17:6)

The water that you could almost call "the water of life", in that context.

So the rock was struck. Water came out. And the people drank and lived.

And on the cross, the body of our Lord was struck. A spear pierced his side, and out, we're told, came blood and water. Or we think in terms of the symbols in

the words we often use: his body broken, his blood spilled.

And, thirsty souls, there is life in the blood.

*I heard the voice of Jesus say,
"Behold, I freely give
the living water. Thirsty souls,
stoop down, and drink, and live"*

As I finish that verse, make it your testimony, too.

*I came to Jesus, and I drank
of that life-giving stream.
My thirst was quenched, my soul revived,
and now I live in Him.*

Trust that God will provide