

Troubles along the Way

Exodus 17 August 27, 2017 Roger Barkley

TROUBLE ONE: THIRST

Let's see how well you remember your childhood catechism.

A catechism is a way of teaching the fundamentals of Christian faith through a series of hundreds of questions and approved answers.

Question 166: "Where is God?"

And all the children respond: "God is everywhere."

The Israelites were the "nobodies" of the Ancient Near East who would find God everywhere, even in the wilderness.

The Israelites were migrants and wanderers, and their encounters with God during actual journeys into unknown and hostile places have shaped our understanding of faith to this day.

Think how different it would be if the Bible had been written from the perspective of established and secure people.

Would we even think in terms of "faith journeys" or of being pilgrims?

Jesus followed the pattern of his ancestors.

Rather than settling in a mountain cave like a guru to whom people would come for sage advice, he traveled from the hinterlands of Galilee to Jerusalem, inviting people to follow him along the way ... a journey from the outskirts to the center of Jewish faith.

And of course, the Bible comes from the experiences of insignificant, unsettled, disenfranchised people for whom God interceded in their time of suffering.

God's concern for the downtrodden shaped the revolutionary ethics our ancestors brought to the world.

From these ancestors, we learned that no matter who we are, we can turn to God in our time of need.

In a radical departure from the notions of the divine of their time, the Israelites found God to be personal, caring for those who've wandered and are lost ... also imagery of the spiritual journey.

At the same time, from the Israelites' journey, we've learned that - while God does intervene to save us - His route often leads us face to face with what we most fear.

The Israelites built this trust in God's care and guidance in the midst of their journey across one of the world's most hostile deserts.

Today we turn to Exodus 17, which is divided into two separate, life-threatening obstacles to the Israelites: lack of water, and an attack by a hostile army.

The story begins, as do so many Old Testament narratives, with a brief historical frame:

Exodus 17:1 The whole Israelite community set out from the Desert of Sin, traveling from place to place as the LORD commanded.

It opens this way to remind us of what happened earlier in the Desert of Sin.

The people had arrived there immediately after escaping from Egypt, and because there was no drinkable water they complained to Moses and Aaron.

God instructed Moses how to turn into polluted water into pure, sweet water.

A bit later they grew hungry and again grumbled and complained, until God rained down manna around their camp.

So, the introductory verses frame the events of 17:1-7 with new complaints and fears about water within the context of "been there, done that."

It can be hard to feel confident in God when you're consumed by discouragement or anxiety.

Your VISA statement is due and you don't have the funds.

Your marriage feels bleached of compassion.

Your dream, which you had been so sure was from God, feels more distant than ever.

So, we do exactly what the Israelites did at Rephidim: we panic and imagine worse case scenarios.

We complain, and we conjure up nostalgia for a time that never really was.

At this point in scripture, the Israelites are about three months into their journey, but they've only traveled a few miles from where they had crossed the Red Sea ahead of Pharaoh's pursuing army.

They have a long way to go.

They'd had a short honeymoon period with God, with singing and dancing, filled with all sorts of expectations about how life would now be perfect.

But as soon as they hit a bump in the road, their enthusiasm deflated.

No more "God is great"; now it is "God has abandoned us."

No more gratitude for clean water and manna; now it is "God, what have You done for me today?"

But God never promised a journey without difficulties and risks.

It's a bit like a new romantic relationship that begins with our thinking that we've found Mr. or Ms. Perfect, and that they are going to save us from ourselves and from the insecurities of life.

But then comes our first disagreement and we go blind with fear, and our first impulse is to just turn and run.

But in this case, God says, "Come on guys. Hang in there. We'll work this out. We'll get through this together."

For now, both God and the humans are new to their relationship and appear to be sizing each other up.

“Testing” is the word that scripture uses.

After God had produced the water for the parched Israelites, the passage says:

Exodus 17:7 And (Moses) called the place Massah and Meribah because the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the LORD saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?”

The very nature of their question is a set-up.

It is an attempt to force God’s hand, to limit the presence of God to something visible, material, and concrete.

It is an attempt to coerce God: “I’ll believe it when I see it.”

It is an attempt to trivialize God by turning Him into a servant at our beck and call whenever we face a difficulty.

Jesus may have been referring to this passage when he was tempted by Satan in the wilderness and responds, Matthew 4:7 *“It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”*

At this early stage of their journey, God must walk a fine line between providing for the people’s needs, while not giving-in to the peoples’ desire for a kind of divine vending machine.

Moses did not name this place after the miracle, but instead gave it the double name, Massha / Meribah, meaning “testing” and “quarreling” to mark the basic memory of this event.

To succeed on the journey from desire to fulfillment, God says that you have to stop thinking like slaves, like life’s victims.

Because they’ve only known life as slaves, the people are wondering why they have been chosen.

Back in Egypt, they had been chosen by Pharaoh for work and death.

But what were God and Moses up to?

Could they trust their promises?

Based on their questions, they seem to assume that God had gone home and left Moses in charge.

And from their experience, what else could they assume except that Moses' agenda mirrors that of the Pharaoh – to use them for labor, maybe to build a new empire to glorify himself.

But it turns out that this God they had just met hadn't abandoned them, but neither was He going to indulge them.

God could have delivered drinking water by leading the people around the next bend to something natural, like a hidden oasis.

Instead, God chose to have life-giving water flow out of something that appeared lifeless.

Exodus 17:6b *“Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink.”*

The rabbinic commentary called the Talmud includes a variety of theories about why God chose to provide water this way.

One thought is that for the next forty years this rock was carried as part of the caravan so that the people would always have water as well as a tangible reminder of God's ability to bring life out of what had appeared hopeless.

Out of slavery, out of the wilderness, God will make life flow in unexpected ways.

The space between promise and fulfillment becomes God's classroom where He teaches us faith and resilience, rather than dependence and entitlement.

TROUBLE TWO: ENEMIES

Most of us don't like risk – we want guarantees of happiness and fulfillment.

That is why 11% of American adults use one or more of the 2,000 internet dating services.

Each site promises in its own way to match you with someone who shares your personality, priorities, and politics ... an instant, hassle-free connection to your soulmate for a trouble-free forever.

Of course, that's a false promise – but as long as people believe that premise they are doomed to a string of shallow relationships.

When I look back over the twenty years of Vivienne and my marriage, I realize that what has actually bonded us were the frictions between us where we are not perfectly matched, and the times when things seemed to blow up in our face.

The times we learned to trust and respect one another mostly were difficult times, but they cemented our love.

I absolutely trust that Vivienne will always have my back – not because some personality profile says we are similar in some arbitrary ways – but because I've experienced that first hand.

Despite all my imperfections, all my screw-ups, all my irrational behaviors – and I have plenty – she's stood by me.

Throughout life, we are promised satisfaction, wholeness and completeness.

But what we find is that life actually gives us what we need.

So, we think that we'll experience satisfaction, wholeness and completeness if life would just remove the obstructions – the things that stand in our way, that mess-up our plans ... the objects of our struggle.

Ironically, what we actually need to grow toward satisfaction, wholeness and completeness is the struggle.

The Israelites were promised a land of milk and honey, but right now they are stuck in the wilderness, facing the unknown while living on a daily ration of bland food and water.

Then, without warning they are attacked by an army of Amalekites.

If you have a dream worthy of your life, then you will be attacked by Amalek.

There will always be some one, some fear, some inner saboteur who stands in your way.

Amalek was a descendant of Esau – the twin brother whom Jacob cheated out of his birthright and inheritance.

The Amalekites had been around for a long time harboring resentment against the tribe of Jacob.

I imagine that they looked at the horizon one day and saw a cloud of dust rising from the desert floor and feared that they were being invaded.

They probably sent out spies who returned with the alarming news that thousands upon thousands of people and cattle were swarming toward them.

They quickly called-up their army and attacked at Rephidim, first hitting the most vulnerable – the stragglers, the elderly, the sick and the children.

Moses ordered Joshua to gather their troops to drive back the Amalekites.

Even though this is the first time we hear of Joshua – who at the end of the wilderness journey will lead the conquest of Palestine – one little sentence back in Exodus 13 alerts us to the Israelites' preparation for war.

Exodus 13:18b *The Israelites went up out of Egypt ready for battle.*

They probably carried slingshots, bows and arrows, spears and swords – but they were not trained and hardened warriors like Amalek's troops.

They had been brick layers, not soldiers.

As Joshua charges into battle, Moses goes to a mountain with the staff of God – the same staff that he held when he met God at the burning bush, that changed into a serpent during his confrontation with Pharaoh, that he raised to part the Red Sea, and that had just tapped the rock to release water.

Along with the staff, Moses raised his hands as if in prayer.

Exodus 17:11 *As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning.*

Clearly, the decisive factor in this battle had little to do with Joshua and his swords; it had to do with Moses and his posture of prayer.

So maybe you're wondering, what's the point of Joshua and his untrained army?

Couldn't God just blast the Amalekites away with a bolt of lightning or something?

Well, because the ultimate point of this battle, and our battles, is not to *win*.

I know that sounds strange, but just like the point of the journey ultimately is not to arrive, in this encounter the point is not to defeat the enemy.

The point is (#1) to become *unafraid* of the enemy, and (#2) to learn how to be an army.

If God had magically done the battle for them, the Israelites would have remained in fear, and would have felt inferior and vulnerable as fighters.

Facing your fears and fighting your own battles is the only way you can keep your freedom.

As a matter of fact, Exodus 17 ends by saying that Amalek will re-appear generation after generation.

He will have to be battled over and over again if the Israelites are going to thrive.

Who is your Amalek?

Who is it that wants to prevent you from arriving at your Promised Land?

Amalek may be your inner saboteur who says you're not good enough, that you've screwed everything up in your life, that you'll never get sober, that if people knew the real you that you'd never be loved.

I met my Amalek before I even started school, and he reappeared in 3rd grade and 6th grade, and in high school as well.

He told me I was weak, that I'd never finish college, that I'd never have a lasting relationship – and for a long time I believed him.

Amalek comes in different circumstances and wearing different faces, but at some level you realize that this feeling is just *de ja vu* all over again.

As long as I hid from my Amalek, and as long as I sought someone else to do my battle for me –Amalek would control me.

I've faced off with my Amalek over and over again ... but with each encounter I've grown stronger, wiser and more confident.

You see, Amalek has a sacred purpose in your life.

And notice that Joshua did not go into battle alone because he had Moses praying for him, but neither was Moses alone on that mountain.

Exodus 17: 12-13 When Moses' hands grew tired, they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it. Aaron and Hur held his hands up—one on one side, one on the other—so that his hands remained steady till sunset. So Joshua overcame the Amalekite army with the sword.

Here's something that's interesting: Moses tires of prayer before Joshua tires of fighting, yet without the prayer the battle would be lost.

Real prayer can be hard work, which is another reason we have a community to support you – just like Aaron and Hur helped carry Moses in prayer.

From the mountaintop perspective with prayer and with the community of prayers around him, Moses was able to see the battle from God's holy perspective rather than from his own narrow perspective.

From there, you are freed from worrying about whether you'll win this battle or not.

From our limited point of view, this particular confrontation with your Amalek may seem like do or die – but in the bigger picture you realize that if you don't win this time it not the end.

In fact, there will be other days, and Amalek will be waiting there as well.

You're free to see this because of the prayer.

Your prayer lifts your eyes to see holy intervention, and holy providence.

Your prayer lifts your eyes to see your holy calling is simply to persevere without worrying about the results of this conflict.

Prayer lifts your eyes to see that even as you face your Amalek, you can live lightly and joyously ... and that someday you'll look back with your community and loved ones to see that those tumultuous, disappointing, frightening days were the most meaningful and important days of your life.