

[Exodus 17:1-7](#)

The manager of Leeds United Football Club, Marco Bielsa, once told a newspaper journalist:

If players were closer to me, they would respect me less because they would see how I really am. It is better to see me at a certain distance than closer.¹

I imagine that many of us would concur with a statement like that. We know that the public 'me' and the private 'me' do not completely match up. There are things in our lives we would not want to be in the public arena.

No such luck for the Israelites in the Bible – or indeed, for the majority of Bible characters. The Israelites are publicly a mess of contradictions. This passage starts off well with them

travelling from place to place as the Lord commanded (verse 1a).

But by the next verse, they are quarrelling with Moses (verse 2).

Partly, you can't blame them being worried. By following the Lord's commands, they have found themselves camping at Rephidim, where

there was no water for the people to drink (verse 1b).

That's serious. They knew that without water, they would die (verse 3).

Aren't they being entirely reasonable? They have obeyed the Lord and ended up in a potentially life-threatening situation.

Maybe if you put it in those terms it sounds familiar to us? How many of us have done what truly believed Christ was calling us to do, only to end up in what feels like a helpless or hopeless dead end?

Certainly, I recognise that. When things are going particularly badly in ministry, or when encouragement has been severely rationed, I am tempted to wonder whether God really called me to this. Or, with a little more honesty, I say, 'Lord, I wish you hadn't called me to be a minister.'

So what resources can we find in this story to help us when we are tempted to quarrel with God?

Firstly, there is an issue of *remembering*.

If you watched [my video for last Sunday](#), you may think this story sounds familiar. Last week, in chapter 16 of Exodus, we heard how the Israelites didn't have food and complained about this. God graciously provided them with manna and quails.

Not only that, but immediately before the manna story, there was another incident that we didn't read. It concerned the Israelites only having bitter-tasting water to drink. Can you guess how they reacted?

And can you guess what God did? Yes, he sorted it out for them miraculously.

So today's story is the third incident in a short space of time where something similar has happened. The Israelites have been in a tight spot and have complained, but God has delivered them.

My first reaction was to think of how slow the disciples of Jesus were to understand what he could do for them. You may recall how Jesus almost despairs of their lack of faith at times.

But the Israelites get progressively worse. This time it says they 'quarrelled' with Moses. It's a stronger word than 'complained'. They are hardening their hearts towards God and his appointed leader. They concentrate more on their negativity than on their God. That is spiritually dangerous.

What can be done about this? It is conceivable that we too might go through one difficult experience after another. How do we keep our hearts open to God?

I believe we do so by concentrating on the very thing the Israelites didn't do – remembering. That is, remembering what God has done for his people in times past.

This can take a couple of forms. One is to remember times God has worked for his suffering people through history, and especially in the biblical accounts.

The other is to remember the times we have clearly known him at work in our own lives. It's a valuable thing to keep a record of the times God has spoken to us or evidently been at work in our lives.

I have alluded before to the wonderful way in which God provided the money for me to go to theological college when I knew he was calling me to something but I didn't know what. It was in the days of student grants, but my Local Education Authority refused me a grant.

One day, I'll tell you the story in some detail, but at the point when not only had I been refused a grant but lost my appeal and yet I still had to guarantee to the college that I could finance myself, you won't be surprised to know that I was at a low.

In that interim period between having no money and God providing for me in astonishing ways, I can't tell you that my faith was rock solid. It wavered.

But at that time, I went back to all the notes I had kept about what had brought me this far. These were mainly Bible verses, but also things I'd read in books, comments people had made to me, or impressions I'd had. These were what sustained me.

One in particular was Psalm 27, and especially its final two verses:

¹³ I remain confident of this:
I will see the goodness of the Lord
in the land of the living.

¹⁴ Wait for the Lord;
be strong and take heart
and wait for the Lord.

It helped that I knew [a song based on those words](#). That kept them in my mind!

Friends, do you have ways of remembering what God has said to you and done in your life down the years? It's invaluable to keep a record. Looking back on it can keep your heart open to God and stop it hardening.

The **second** resource is **grace**.

What more can we say about grace? God cleansed the bitter water at Marah, he provided the manna and quail when there was no food, and now he provides water from the rock (verse 6). How gracious is that to a people who, despite his previous provision, have upped the ante in their moaning?

We need to place this action of God into the bigger picture. Some would say that God will always be gracious and inclusive of rebellious sinners. He will save all people.

But that is not the biblical picture. What happens here is that God acts in grace to save these people and to preserve his ongoing plan for the Israelites. Israel will make it to the Promised Land. But it will not be this generation. They will

die in the wilderness. A new generation will arise that will have faith and will go in under the leadership not even of Moses but of Joshua.

Grace, then, is real, and God acts in grace in the hope that it might engender a positive response to him from us. But he is not an indulgent grandfather figure who is some kind of soft touch with the grandchildren. And I fear that's the sentimental way in which some Christians wrongly conceive of God in his love and grace.

For us, this means that he will always have his purposes for his Church. Remember how Jesus said that he would build his church, and the gates of Hades would not prevail against it. However, that doesn't mean that individual churches and individual Christians can't fall out of his purposes and end up failing to see what God had purposed for them all along.

So as God acts graciously for the third consecutive occasion in this short space of time, let us not take that as a sign that he will go soft on sin and unbelief. Let us see it as a sign that he longs for us to respond in faith and obedience.

And in that respect, note where the rock is that Moses is to strike. It is at Horeb (verse 6).

Does that sound familiar? Horeb is the alternative name for Sinai. The Israelites are close to Mount Sinai, where God will reveal himself in dramatic and fearful ways, and then give the Ten Commandments. He has saved them from Egypt, and the Ten Commandments show what he is looking for in response to that salvation.

That fits with what I have just said about grace being real but not indulgent. God acts in salvation towards his people in distress. He does this before we do anything good for him. But the proper response to grace is to believe him and obey him.

If you doubt me, let me take you to Psalm 95, the psalm known in Christian worship as 'The Venite' for its first word in Latin. It's a psalm that begins in jubilant praise for God's care of his flock and his majesty in creation, leading his people to bow down in worship.

That's the good stuff. But the second half of the psalm provides the sting in the tail:

Today, if only you would hear his voice,

⁸ ‘Do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah,
as you did that day at Massah in the wilderness,

⁹ where your ancestors tested me;
they tried me, though they had seen what I did.

¹⁰ 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.”

¹¹ So I declared on oath in my anger,
“They shall never enter my rest.”

It’s one thing to bring our pain and struggles to God, but it’s quite another to keep testing God and quarrelling with him.

As I wondered how to **conclude** this, I thought the obvious thing to do was to look at how Exodus concludes this episode:

⁷ And he called the place Massah and Meribah because the
Israelites quarrelled and because they tested the Lord saying, ‘Is
the Lord among us or not?’

And I thought, that’s it! The Israelites were known here for quarrelling with the LORD and testing him. A question we might reflect on is, what do we want to be known for in our lives? Surely we don’t want to be known as those who quarrelled with our God and put him to the test, do we?

Wouldn’t it be infinitely preferable if we were known as those who even in the dark times remembered the goodness of God and responded to his grace in faith and obedience?

May the Holy Spirit help us to be such people.

¹ The *I newspaper*, 9th March 2019; quoted by Paul Oakley in *Encounter with God* on Judges 6:25-40, 24th September 2020.