

"Blame or Trust"

<u>Occasion</u>	Evening Service at Therfield Chapel
<u>Day, Date & Time</u>	Sunday 1 June 2003 at 18:30
<u>Basis</u>	Exodus 15:22-27
<u>Reading</u>	Exodus 15:22-27
<u>Hymns</u>	756, 765, 760 from Mission Praise
<u>Songs</u>	782, 795, 793, 796, from Mission Praise
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Who do you blame when things go wrong?

Let's face it,
you're not exactly short of choice.

First you can blame those closest to you;
your husband or wife,
your closest friend,
the neighbours,
the Council,
the Government.
Anyone will do,
as long it's not yourself.

Sometimes we have a brave fit of honesty
and blame those who actually caused the problem,
but largely it is much easier to blame the system
or society at large.

Unbelievers invariably blame the State.
Believers blame Satan.
Then we blame God,
and eventually we may get around to blaming ourselves.

We live in a blame culture.
You can even hire solicitors for free,
and they will fight your case
and you only pay them if they get you compensation.
- a hideous development of our modern money-grabbing
self-centred
individualistic society

which hopefully
all honest-minded people will boycott.

Nothing is ever the fault of the individual.

We are circumstantially or environmentally conditioned to behave in the way
we do.

The pervert was molested as a child.

The thug was abused and socially deprived.

The adulterer never knew a stable family life

and so on.

Clearly there is some truth in this view,

which the Bible to some extent supports.

We read that the sins of the Fathers will be visited on the children to the fourth
generation.

The Bible talks of the children's teeth being set on edge when their parents eat
sour grapes.

We are to a very significant extent affected by our parents
and the society and circumstances of our life

from the time we enter this world.

And in turn,

what we do affects those around us and those who come after us

to a degree which we usually fail to contemplate.

But the overarching biblical view is that first we should look at ourselves.

God has given the human race

and us as individuals

responsibility for the planet and its people.

And many of the ills that we suffer are brought upon us by our own sinfulness,

selfishness

and stupidity.

We should first blame ourselves.

But next we should look to God.

for God takes responsibility for every happening on Earth,

and uses them to test our faith

and to control the destiny of the Earth

and its inhabitants.

Modern Christians have a penchant for blaming Satan for everything they find
distasteful

or that thwarts them in doing what they have decided God wants them or
others to do.

Yet when I read my Bible I find a different perspective.

Whilst we are told that the Devil goes around as a roaring lion seeking whom he may
devour (1 Peter 5:8)

and that we are involved in a spiritual war with the forces of God and good
against those of Satan and evil,

yet the Bible is unequivocal in its view

that Satan was conquered at the cross
and subdued by the resurrection.

To give you some idea, the word Satan occurs only 36 times in the New Testament,
whereas the word Christ appears 555 times.

Who would you say is the most important.

Furthermore,

the Christian is indwelt by the Spirit of God
and the power that is in us is greater
than he that is in the world.

So whilst we must be on our guard against the attacks of Satan,

we must remember that the victory is already won.

His major points of attack will be to cause us to sin against God
and against one another.

We must beware and resist.

But we play into his wicked hands when we imagine that he has
unbridled power.

Why should we be afraid of a defeated enemy?

So when we come to our passage for this evening who is responsible for the water
shortage?

Answer: God.

But the people can't see it.

There are three perspectives on this short passage.

The first is to view it as pure history.

The second is to see some parallel related to the State,
and the third is to see some parallel with the Church.

We shall try to look at all three,

but you will find that they blur into one another.

The people of Israel have crossed the Reed Sea

and celebrated God's victory over their enemies
and his salvation of his people.

Up till now it has been all drama and action.

But now comes the anticlimax.

Almost overnight,

they have been transformed from being slaves in a rich and fertile country,
living in houses with doors,

To a free people with no fixed abode,
nomads in the wilderness
with no real idea where the next drink
or the next meal

may come from.

They have learnt to trust God in the crisis,

but can they trust him in the mundanity
and hardships
of everyday wilderness freedom.

It had already been decided that they would not take the easy route
up the Mediterranean coast
and through Philistine country,
that would have been quicker,
but they would have been slaughtered on the way.
Philistine country is today the Gaza strip
and Israelis were no more welcome then than they are today.

But there were other reasons for moving slowly.
When Israel left Egypt they were a family of tribes
and not a nation.
They were not fit for battle
and no way could they hope to win a war in their present state.
Much had to be done to prepare them as a people
for what lay ahead
and they needed to be hardened off in the desert
away from the creature comforts of civilised Egypt.

So instead of travelling eastwards,
they moved south,
down the south-east coast of the Gulf of Suez towards Sinai.
And they ran out of water.

After 3 days,
dehydrated
and with their tongues hanging out,
they made it to the oasis called Marah,
only to find that the water was undrinkable.

In dry and arid places,
what water there is can often be full of minerals
and hence horrible to the taste.

But Moses was no stranger to desert survival
and he probably knew what was needed,
but not where to find it.

So he cried out to God,
and God, true to his promises
showed Moses the wood he needed.

The wood sweetened the water enough
to allow the people to assuage their thirst.

Notice though the difference between the reaction of Moses
and the reaction of the people to the crisis.
And crisis it was.

Half a million grumpy people snapping at your heels is no joke
as Moses was to find,
time and time again.

The people grumbled at Moses,
but Moses cried to the Lord.

This is not the first time that the people blamed Moses for their predicament
and it won't be the last.

Turn back if you will to Chapter 14 and verse 11.

“They said to Moses, “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done in bringing us out of Egypt? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!””

And so here,
in spite of the miraculous deliverance that they had experienced at God's hand
only three days earlier,
they grumble against Moses because they cannot drink the water.

But what does it say in the second half of verse 25,

**“And there the Lord made a decree and a law for them,
and there he tested them.”**

So, who *was* responsible?

God was responsible.

It was **His** doing.

Not Moses,

not the Devil,

not natural circumstances,

though clearly they all played their part.

But, ‘No’.

It was God.

And he takes full responsibility,

for **“there he tested them”**.

Would they,

having seen his mighty power,

having seen him at work in Egypt against Pharaoh,

having seen and observed the plagues

and knowing that those plagues

which had done so much damage to the Egyptians

but hadn't touched them;

having seen him compel Pharaoh to drive them out of Egypt,

having seen Him drive back the waters of the Red Sea,

having seen him destroy the Egyptian army before their very eyes,

having experienced His deliverance,

having praised his name and glorified his great works,

would they now trust him in the hard times?

Answer: “No”

And why?

Because we never ever learn to trust God.

So we always blame someone else.

They failed the test.
Don't we all - ?

So God starts the training process with his people.
- this embryo nation from which one day,
he would bring the Messiah,
to save not only his delinquent chosen ones
but also the whole world.

Verse 26:

'If you listen carefully to the Lord your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring upon you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians for I am the Lord who heals you.'

Was God promising them a healthier life style in the desert,
away from the infections prevalent in civilised Egypt?
Or was he saying that his instructions
if adhered to
would prevent the kind of illnesses that the Egyptians were subject to
because of their eating and sanitary habits?
I really don't know.

But what he certainly was saying
was that if they obeyed him and kept his word
he would care for them in a peculiar way
and they would be His people.

And as we go through Exodus
and were we to continue to read on through the subsequent books of Leviticus,
Numbers
and Deuteronomy,
we would see such promises develop into a full covenant
in which God promises to bless his people,
if they keep his law.

But for now,
this is enough.
Enough for the people to know that God is on their side,
but conditionally on their obedience and trust.

Dr Schluter of the Jubilee Centre in Cambridge is an economist
who has in the past
advised government on matters to do with the national economy.
When I first met him,
many years ago,
he was giving a series of lectures at the Diamond in Grange
Road
demonstrating that many of the principles that God had laid down for
the people of Israel in the first few books of the Bible
could be applied today

even in our modern society
to the benefit of 20th Century civilisation.

So from this point on through this early history of the formation of Israel,
we are privileged to observe God at work building the nation of Israel,
and we should take note as we go
of what God is doing.

Here it is clear to see.

We have watched it being worked through in earlier chapters.
God has prepared Moses,
trained him in the Egyptian court
honed him in the desert in exile,
and appointed him to be the leader of his people in these early years.

So when the people have a go at Moses
they are criticising God's appointed leader.
And we shall see later on in Exodus
that God takes a pretty dim view of that.

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul tells us to pray for our civil leaders,
for they are appointed by God to rule over us.

In a modern democracy,
we appoint our own leaders from among the people,
and some would say that we get the leaders we deserve.
Nevertheless, as Christians, we should take great care
before we condemn those whom God has placed in authority over us,
recognising firstly that God has placed them there in his great wisdom
and secondly that
at all times,
God may be testing our faith in his judgement.

And then there is the parallel to this in the Church.
I alluded in my prologue to the tendency of Christians to blame anyone but themselves
when the going gets tough.

Most of us will be familiar with the highs and lows of life
and the Christian life in particular.

There are times when God seems close
and times when he seems far away.
There are times when we rejoice in great victory
and all seems well between us and the world
and between us and God
and God has done great things in our lives.

But then comes the hard slog of mundane earthly experience
and we are tempted to think that God has deserted us
and the devils whisper in our ear suggesting that he has.

What do we do?
Blame the Devil?

Remember that the Spirit of God who indwells you has more power in his little finger
than the Devil and his army of devils put together.

Or maybe we have enjoyed good times at church.

There have been times when the services,
the praise,

the prayers

and the sermons

have really built us up and we have experienced the joy of the Lord,
but then it tails off

and we don't enjoy going to church any more.

We don't get out of it what we used to.

And we long to regain the joy we used to have.

What do we do?

Blame the church leaders?

Remember that God has appointed them to lead you

and teach you

and they need your utmost support

if they are to achieve what God has appointed them to do.

God is in control at all times.

He uses the good times to bless you

and the hard times to test you

and teach you to trust him and obey him more.

He wants nothing but the best for you,

but he wants you to play your part both in society

and in the Church

So the people move on from the bitter waters of Marah.

Have they learnt their lesson?

I think not,

but we shall see.

I wonder if they knew that a mere seven miles down the road was Elim.

Less than a day's journey and there they would find sweet water

and plenty of it

and there they could rest a while.

And this is how God deals with us.

He allows us to bring hardship on ourselves by our own sinfulness,

selfishness

and stupidity.

He allows circumstances to impinge upon our lives which are not our fault

and which bring great suffering in their wake.

Sometimes these are the fault of others,

sometimes they are the outfall of sin and disease in our world

and sometimes they are the direct attack of the devil and
his demons,

as in the case of Job.

But He is always there waiting and longing to see our faith strengthen,
our resolve reinforced
and our love for Him and his ways increased
so that when we receive the blessings that are just around the corner,
we shall know that he is indeed God supreme.

May he deal with each one of us with love and tenderness,
so that we shall grow in grace
and in love for our Lord Jesus
as we learn the hard way to trust and obey.

May God go with you
and bless us all.

Amen

Paul Rydon
1 June 2003