

THERFIELD CHAPEL EVENING SERVICE

11th May 2003

Exodus 13:17 – 14:14 Bungy Rope Faith

1.1.1.1.1 327 Immortal, Invisible

Opening Prayer:

Notices:

Collection

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SH Faithful one, so unchanging

423 Living under the shadow of his wing

Reading: Exodus 13:17 – 14:14

Intercessory Prayer

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Address

22 *All the way my saviour leads me*

Closing Prayer

Exodus 13:17 – 14:14 : Bungy Rope Faith

Clear Cloudy Guidance

What would you give for a pillar of cloud and fire to guide you?

Wouldn't that be great?

No more wondering whether to mow the lawn or go shopping on Saturday morning!
No more worrying about whether to go to visit Aunt Maude at the weekend, or to see Arsenal loose the league title!

Of course, some things might still be difficult – like deciding where and when to go on holiday, as generally speaking airlines need you to book your tickets in advance and are unaccustomed to admitting passengers solely on the basis that they are accompanying a pillar of cloud.

But more seriously, wouldn't it be great to have such clear guidance from God about where you should be going in life? Wouldn't you like to have direct and irrefutable guidance about when to change jobs, and which one to change to? And think of all the heartache that would be saved if we could count on God to clearly direct us to the one we should marry!

And right now, of course, wouldn't it be great to be led straight to our new Pastor, without having to spend all the time and effort we are going to now to filter out unsuitable candidates and find one who is right for us?

We might think that such direct leading from God would help to ensure that we stay close to him and are always “in the centre of his will”; and that such constant reminders of his presence and care would dispel any notion of doubt from our minds. So the attitude of the Israelites who had just this guidance comes as quite a surprise.

Unbelievable doubts

If anyone had cause to trust God, then surely it must have been this group of people. Over the past months, they had seen miraculous and irrefutable signs of God's power over all things – his superiority over the gods of Egypt, his control of every aspect of nature, and most recently his sovereignty over life itself. They had learned that Moses too could be trusted as God's appointed leader – for everything he said would happen did. After 430 years of captivity, they had finally been freed from their slavery, and not only so but had effectively plundered the Egyptians as they left, and now carried with them great wealth, which would surely make their future more secure.

Not only so, but each one of them could be confident both of God's continued presence with them, and of where he intended them to go. Whilst God still spoke directly to Moses (as in 14:1), the pillar of smoke and fire could be seen by all. This was clearly a supernatural phenomenon, reminding them that they were accompanied by the God who had demonstrated his power in Egypt.

There could be no doubting the historic significance of their exodus either. Each one of them knew the story of their ancestors' arrival in Egypt all those years ago. Many if not all of them would have visited Joseph's tomb, and been reminded of the promise passed from generation to generation, that when God came to their aid they were to take his remains back to the promised land.

And now that moment had arrived. What excitement there must have been as a team of young men were dispatched to the tomb to fetch Joseph's remains – expertly mummified by Egyptian embalmers, so after a mere 400 years it would be pretty well preserved. Perhaps they took with it the heavy and ornate sarcophagus which would almost certainly have been provided for so esteemed a body. What a thrill to be alive to see the moment that this ancient prophecy was coming true! Any doubts that God was unable or unwilling to keep his promises would be wiped away; and if they cross-referenced back to God's original prophecy to Abraham in Genesis 15:13, they would realise that his timing was spot on too – in the fourth century of slavery in Egypt.

So these people had every reason to trust their God. He had proved completely faithful to his promise, even down to the timing of their release; he had demonstrated his sovereignty over everything and everyone, but also his love and care for his people in providing deliverance from the angel of death. And even now he provided a dramatic reminder of his presence and guidance.

God was with them; what could they fear?

Fearing Pharaoh Following

If you ignored the fact of God's presence with them, then they actually had quite a lot to be concerned about. After the initial shock of the final plague, and the hasty resolution of the Egyptians to not only let the Israelites go but to help them on their way before any other disaster struck, the realisation set in that there was no one left to make their bricks and do their dirty work. After the cries of mourning for the firstborn subsided, the country did not return to normal. The ambitious construction projects of which they were so fond ground to a complete halt, starved of slave labour to provide the raw materials and the brute force which was required. What an ignominy that would be for Pharaoh and his hench men, not just to lose face for the moment, but to lose the opportunity to create monuments which would speak of their glory for thousands of years to come.

But it was not too late. A million people can't travel far in just a few days, neither can they be hidden very easily in the open desert. Even without the tell-tale sign of the pillar of smoke, it would be pretty easy to track down and overtake them. So Pharaoh prepares all the forces he can muster, including his cavalry and his armoured personnel carriers, and sets out in hot pursuit.

To his delight, the Israelites appear to have taken a wrong turn and not to be sure of where to go next. By heading South instead of East they had become trapped by the Red Sea, and could not hope to cross to the other side before they were overhauled. This was going to be easier than a turkey shoot! The ill disciplined Israelites, with no weapons to speak of, only emergency rations, and hampered by their women and children would be no match for even a relatively small force of the world super-power's army.

News of the pursuing army would quickly spread through the Israelite camp, fuelling the discontent which had already started when they were told to re-trace their steps to Pi Hahiroth. They were trapped, hemmed in by the impassable wetlands at the end of the Red Sea, by Egyptian fortress towns to the north, and the Egyptian rapid-reaction force coming from the east.

Perhaps it is only natural that they should fear.

And yet the fact remains, they had more reasons to believe than they did to doubt. As Matthew Henry said back in the early 18th Century:

As the Egyptians were angry with themselves for the best deed they ever did, so the Israelites were angry with God for the greatest kindness that was ever done them; so gross are the absurdities of unbelief.

They may have been hemmed in on all sides, but there was one direction which they were not hemmed in – and that was upwards, which was in fact where there help was to come from. Which ought to be an encouragement to us to look to God next time we feel trapped down here.

How could they doubt?

So, why did they fall so quickly into fear, and thus unbelief? Were they so thick that they could not see these signs for what they were? Had they such short memories that they could not remember what God had done yesterday, so only saw today's problems? We might excuse ourselves for lack of faith today, as we have seen no dramatic large-scale intervention of God in our nation, and have no supernatural signs and wonders to verify his on-going presence with us. But you would think that for the Israelites it would not be so much an act of faith, as an act of common sense, to trust in God's ability to deliver them yet again.

As the rest of the Old Testament shows, this is no isolated case of doubt. Again and again the Israelites experience great blessings and mighty victories from their God, but quickly fall back into unbelief. It is as if there is some strong attraction drawing them back to Egypt, with all its hardships, slavery and false gods.

Have you tried that bouncy-castle game, where an elastic bungy rope is tied round your waist, and you have to run as far as you can up the track? Sooner or later you slip, or loose momentum, or simply cannot pull any more, and whoosh, back you go to where you started.

It seems the Israelites' hearts are attached by that sort of rope to their old ways – so that whenever God has pulled them closer to himself, they strain to return and at the slightest opportunity, the flimsiest excuse, or the mildest opposition, they go hurtling back to square one.

Why should this be the case? Why should a people be naturally inclined to distance themselves from their god? And if it was true so consistently for the Israelites, does this mean that it is bound to be true for us also?

These are quite profound questions; the answers will affect our expectations and outlook in life.

The disease of Sin

The first thing to say is, like so many perplexing things about our world, this is not the way it is supposed to be. Simple logic suggests that the Israelites should stay faithful to the God who has consistently proven trustworthy, and indeed omnipotent. So something is wrong. Something quite fundamental is wrong. Something is wrong in a way that separates them from their true God in a powerful and persistent way.

That something is, of course, sin. Like a disease, but much worse than SARS, this affects us all - 100% of people have it, and 100% of people will die from it.

It affects everyone – even the specially chosen people of God. There is no room for any sort of pride in our birth-rite, our achievements, or our allegiances. We are all guilty. And the affects are brutal and destructive on ourselves and each-other – to the extent that a life of slavery in Egypt seems more attractive than a live of freedom in the promised land!

Yet we have lived with it so long that we fail to spot that it is in fact unnatural, an unwelcome and unwanted intruder into our lives.

So yes, we are in the same boat as the Israelites, and ought not to treat their failures with scorn, for we would fail in exactly the same manner.

Tackling the disease not the symptom

So what is God playing at here? In rescuing his people from slavery in Egypt, is he not tackling the symptom of the disease rather than the disease itself? In fact, at each stage where he acts to deliver his people, and sees them restored to their faith, is he not fighting a losing battle? What is the point of going to all this effort, only to see the people rebel again and again?

If this were all God were doing, then it would indeed be futile. But far from it! At each stage he is moving a step closer to dealing with the root problem. He has just shown his people that it is only by the sacrifice of a pure and innocent life, in this case of a lamb, that their firstborn were spared death. This would become ingrained into their culture – there is a price to pay to live with God. So when the day came when he sent his own son to die on the cross, they ought to realise that this was the real sacrifice that all the Passovers foreshadowed.

It was that sacrifice which made all the difference. Although the Israelites had been spared the plague of the firstborn by their sacrifice of lambs and obedience to God, they were still the same on the inside. They were still tied by that bungy to their old ways. But Christ's death provided the cure for the disease of sin; so that those who believe in him have their bungy rope cut, and can follow God without being constantly pulled back to their old ways.

That is Good News indeed! In trusting in Christ, we are not condemned to a life of constantly falling back into our old ways. This is how Paul puts it in Galatians:

Galatians 5:¹⁶ So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. ¹⁷ For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.

¹⁹ *The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery;*
²⁰ *idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition,*
dissensions, factions ²¹ *and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did*
before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

²² *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,* ²³
gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. ²⁴ *Those who belong to*
Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. ²⁵ *Since we live*
by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. ²⁶ *Let us not become conceited, provoking*
and envying each other.

Notice how relevant both lists of bad and good things are today, nearly 2000 years after they were first written down, and in a totally different culture. You see, no matter how advanced our civilisation, or what our heritage, the basic problem is the same - and so is the answer.

A guide on the inside

The Israelites had external signs to guide them, which we might think would be a sure way to keep them on the straight and narrow. Indeed, looking ahead at verse 19, it looks like the cloud is in fact a manifestation of God's presence with them. Yet it is clear that such treatment did not succeed for them, and frankly neither would it for us. We do not have a pillar of cloud, but what we do have, though less dramatic, is much more precious and effective – for we have God's presence not *with* us, but *inside* our very hearts, to comfort and guide us from the inside out. That is a more sure way, for it is dealing with the root cause of the problem, which is not out there in the big bad world, but in here in our sinful hearts.

This does not mean that we will never fail. In some ways, it would be nice to think it would; but the Holy Spirit is too gentle for that. We know from the Gospels, and we will see this afresh in a couple of months time when we start Mark's gospel, just how brutal demon possession was – crushing the identity and will of the possessed person in a similar way to severe mental illness today. That is not how God's Spirit indwells us, just as in Old Testament times that was not how God achieved his purposes.

Guiding graciously

Did you notice how aware God was of their frailty when he led them away from the fortified Philistine trade route and south into the unpopulated desert? And also how little he imposes on them in the forth-coming conflict with the Egyptian army – 14:14 “The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still.”

He knew that they were weak and down-trodden, having known nothing but slavery, and having no experience or stomach for war.

God could have given the Israelites supernatural confidence and fighting ability, so that when they met Egyptian or Philistine opposition they would, against all the odds, win through. Indeed, in weeks and years to come, God would lead them into battle and deliver their enemies into their hands. But few military victories are without cost – even the relative walk-over in Iraq left around 120 US and British servicemen dead - and this was certainly true of Israel's battles.

As a group, they were not ready psychologically to accept such casualties as the price of victory, so not only would God need to give them fighting ability and confidence which they did not have, but he would also need to suppress their anxiety over casualties. In short, he would need to override their own personalities and control them like robots. Which, when you think about it, would be a more pernicious slavery than that which they had just been delivered from.

In our haste and short-sightedness, we often wish people would just fall into line and do what we want them to in order to get the job done. At least that is a frustration which I often have, particularly at work where, for example, I am responsible at the moment for an initiative to dramatically reduce our product development times. This will require all those involved to change their attitudes quite markedly; sadly I can't just tell them to do it!

But God is more gracious than me, indeed more gracious than any of us. In that graciousness, God does not override our own will or give us a personality transplant when we come to him. He may strengthen us for a particular task, or grant us courage for a special job; but he does not run rough-shod over our temperaments nor does he disregard our natural abilities in order to use his supernatural gifts, which often enhance rather than supplant talents that we already have.

The time would come when God would deliver the Israelites through their own swords; but knowing the Israelites' weakness, this time he delivered them by their stillness.

Bouncing back to God

God is just as gracious today, which means that we cannot and will not lead perfect lives. He promises that he will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we can bear:

1 Corinthians 10:¹³ No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

So there will never come a time when he abandons us to failure. He will always provide a way out, though we may sometimes choose not to take it. That does not mean that we are lost, or have no hope. If God could love us before we even loved him, how much more does he love us now? Whilst it may be natural to think that God can't possibly take us back after yet another failure, the truth is that he always will – just as he always took back the Israelites. This is a very important fact to remember, so that we always get back to God and experience his forgiveness as soon as we possibly can, instead of moping around in our own guilt.

Here we might begin to despair, for left to our own devices we will quite probably mope around for the longest time. But there is more Good News than that we have been released from the bungy drawing us back to sin. Not only has that bungy been broken, but a new bungy has been tied to us, which draws us back to God! Having committed our lives to Him, he will not let us go! His Holy Spirit remains in our hearts, reminding us of his love, making us uncomfortable when we stray from him, and pulling us back – albeit gently and graciously – to true fellowship with him.

He may not lead us by pillars of fire, but he will lead us. At every cross-roads, he is right here in us, providing either the assurance that we are taking a course he approves of, or the discomfort that we are not. This does not mean he will take all the choices for us – we have seen he is too gracious for that, for he did not create us with the ability to make our own decisions, only to remove that responsibility from us. Whether it is choosing a new job, choosing a new pastor, or even choosing our life-partner, God is there to give his approval or disapproval to the decision we propose to take.

If we had a pillar of cloud in front of our faces, then we would not need to pray to know where we should go – which perhaps is another reason why such obvious guidance is not the norm! We need to be open to God's prompting; we need to keep in tune with God, through prayer, through reading his word which so often guides us in the right paths, and through our fellowship with each other.

But we need not live in fear of straying, because God's Spirit will naturally keep us close to him, so that he will lead us throughout our lives, and ultimately to an eternity in the real promised land, which will be heaven indeed.