

A bad case of déjà vu

Intro: I'm sure we've all had moments when, even if we've never been somewhere before or we know something has not happened before, it *feels like* we've seen it before. We call it *déjà vu*, from the French, literally meaning "already seen". As we read Chapter 17 of Exodus we may find we have a very bad case of *déjà vu*, as it follows a well-trodden path.

The same old story: As the chapter begins it seems like the same old story is being played out yet again. There's no water to drink, so the Israelites start to grumble, against Moses and God, suggesting they were better off in Egypt 1-3. What terrible memories they have... nothing could be further from the truth! It seems that not only have they already forgotten just how bad things were in Egypt, they have also forgotten more recent events.

Let's just take a look back for a moment over the last few chapters...

In 14:11-12 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 to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn't we say to you in Egypt, 'Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians'? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!"

In 15:23-24 when the water at Marah was bitter they "grumbled against Moses, saying, 'What are we to drink?'"

In 16:2-3, half way through only the second month since they left Egypt, they were hungry and grumbled, saying "If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death."

And now here they are grumbling yet again. Moses must have been thinking, "Just *once*, can't they just trust me, and trust God!?" If you are parents and have ever been on a journey with your children you've probably experienced them endlessly asking, "Are we nearly there yet?" as they start to argue and fight with each other. It's just possible I may have been one of those children once! The Israelites here are just like those children, complaining and starting to bicker among themselves.

Nothing's Gonna Change My Love For You: Fortunately for the Israelites the *déjà vu* here extends not only to their grumbling but also to God's *response*. As a loving and caring Father he doesn't give his children what they *deserve* (And I'll leave it to the parents among you to decide what that might be... spanking may not be politically correct these days, but sometimes it is the right thing to do!) but what they *need*.

As you know, my mind is never slow to provide a song for every occasion, and as I prepared this I could hear in my head Glenn Medeiros warbling his number one hit from 1988, *Nothing's Gonna Change My Love For You*. Nothing could be more true of God.

Even as the people complained and Moses cried out in exasperation and desperation to the Lord, fearful of what the people might do to him, God did not respond in anger, but in *love*. "Take your staff and strike the rock at Horeb with it", he said, "and water will come out of it for the people to drink." 5-6. And so it happened...

God is not capricious and does not withdraw his love for his people on a whim or just because they grumble a bit... and what a good thing that is for us just as much as it was for them! He has not brought them out of Egypt only to abandon them now. You get two songs for the price of one today, because at this point the jukebox in my head carried smoothly on into Rick Astley's *Never Gonna Give You Up*. There was an online trend, called "rickrolling", a few years ago of tricking people into clicking on a link in an e-mail or on a website that unexpectedly led to a video of Rick performing his greatest hit. I bet you never thought you'd get rickrolled in a sermon!

They might be cheesy songs, but it is still true that nothing will change God's love for us, and he will never give us up... or give up on us.

You might notice here that Moses not only has to pray, but then has to follow very specific instructions before his prayer is answered. God always answers the prayers of his children, but sometimes he makes us work for it, and we *always* have to do what he tells us.

Moses also tries to make sure that maybe this time the Israelites will remember what happened, because he names the place *Massah* and *Meribah*, which meant "testing" and "quarrelling". Maybe one day a future generation might ask "Why is this place called Massah?" and be reminded of how the people tested God... and how he passed the test!

From one crisis to another: And so the crisis is resolved. But almost before Moses has time to breathe a sigh of relief there's another one. It's a bit like waiting for a bus... you wait for ages, then two come at once!

This time the Israelites are coming under attack from the Amalekites 8. It's a new challenge for them: though in years to come it will become a familiar pattern, this is the first time they've really had to do battle.

Prayer and action hand in hand: A new challenge needs a new approach, but *also* an old one. Moses calls upon Joshua to "Choose some of our men and go out to fight the Amalekites" 9, while he himself prepares to stand on top of the hill with Aaron and Hur and raise the staff of God in prayer 9-10.

Just as in the previous crisis, prayer is needed, and Moses will see to that. But action is required also. This time men are needed who are able to fight, and Joshua will lead them. This is the first time we hear of Joshua, who will become much more prominent as time goes on and eventually take over leadership of the Israelites from Moses.

God here calls Moses and Joshua to different tasks, according their strengths and gifts. While Moses prays, Joshua fights. But they are *united* in serving God and in working for the good of his people. If the Israelites are to survive this battle, *prayer and action must go hand in hand*. There is a picture there of how things will later be in the church, when Paul speaks of the many different gifts God gives and roles people will play and stresses that they are all needed.

Continued success depends on continued prayer: As the battle goes on a pattern emerges. As long as Moses hold up the staff, or in other words as long as he keeps praying, the battle goes Joshua's way, but whenever he lets the staff fall, or stops praying, the battle turns against him 11. When they recognise the pattern Aaron and Hur are able to help by providing a rock for Moses to sit on and by supporting his arms when he grows tired 12.

I think there are two things we can learn from this. The first is that it is never enough just to delegate one person to pray. While there may be those in the church with a particular gift for prayer, they still *need support* from the rest of the church.

And the second thing is that *continued success depends on continued prayer*. In Leslie we are on the verge of finally being able to use the first phase of our building project, while at the same time preparing to begin the next phase. That didn't happen because we prayed *once*, but because we *kept on* praying and because we *continue* to pray. The passage says, "Joshua overcame the Amalekite army with the sword" 13, and that is true... but equally true is that the victory was won by *prayer*.

A look forward: We've focused so far on what God has done in this chapter, but I want to end by putting it in context in the bigger story of the Exodus from Egypt and a look *forward*. I am one of those people who, whenever there is a general election, is up watching the coverage well into the night. The question asked among such people after the 1997 General Election was, "Were you up for Portillo?", as Michael Portillo losing his seat at silly o'clock came to be seen as the defining moment of the election. I *was* up! But right from when the first few results start trickling in, the pundits in the studio are analysing them and projecting what the outcome will be...

We have the benefit of hindsight and can see what the Israelites couldn't yet see at that point, that this was still early on in a long story, but God would be continue to be with them at every step until his plan was fulfilled. Sometimes people wonder why the Israelites took forty years to reach the Promised Land. The answer, at least in part, is that *it took them that long to learn to trust God*. Having been a Christian for over 44 years now I can relate to that!

Conclusion: If there's one thing I want us to take from this chapter, and indeed from the Book of Exodus as a whole, it is that God, rather like Magnus Magnusson on Mastermind, *always* finishes what he starts! Let's praise him and thank him...