

## **Living in Between Promise and its Fulfilment**

Exodus 17:1-7

### **Intro Death Valley**

Have you ever been to a hot and dry desert? I had the opportunity to visit Death Valley National Park in 2010. Death Valley is known as the hottest place in the United States. When I was there in June, the temperature was about 106 degrees. The sunlight literally stung my skin and I could not stand outside of the car for more than 10 minutes due to the unbearable heat. An interesting thing that I realized at the park was that I didn't sweat outside of the car even though it was extremely hot. It was only when I went back into the car and sat in front of a cool air conditioner that I began to sweat again. You can guess why. Death Valley is not only hot but it is also so arid that our sweat evaporates almost instantly. But the lack of perspiration doesn't mean that our body is not dehydrated. We still have to drink plenty of water even though we don't sweat at all. When our body does not have enough water, we feel thirsty, dizzy, and we even get headaches. If we cannot drink water and continue to be dehydrated, we may lose our lives. Water is necessary for life.

### **1<sup>st</sup> page Israel complain**

On this note, we may then understand the Israelites' complaint against Moses. After they had left Egypt, the whole company of Israel had to walk through the Sin desert for about two months. According to biblical scholars, it may have been late May to June when they arrived at Rephidim. Today's average high temperature in the Sinai Peninsula is 91 degrees in May and 104 degrees in June. In such extreme heat, the survival time without water shortens considerably. The Israelites did not have the luxury of Gray Hound tour buses with air conditioning

and icy cold bottled water. They didn't have a choice to plan their day trip and had to march through the desert as the Lord commanded. According to one scholar, without water, "One long, day's march on a hot June day in the Sin desert was all it would take to finish God's people." After a long march, they arrived at Rephidim, but there was no water to drink. They were thirsty. What were they supposed to do in that situation?

Imagine you are on a group tour in Joshua Tree National park, in California. After a long and exhausting desert tour, you are drenched with sweat and covered in dust. You can even taste the dry desert dust in your mouth. Thankfully, you have just arrived at your hotel room about 8:30 p.m. What do you want to do first? Take a shower. Right? You would want to take a shower to wash away the dust and refresh yourself from the heat and weariness. But when you turn on the water, nothing comes out of the shower head. You try to do everything you can, but it doesn't work. Your friends next door also have the same problem. You call to the front desk several times but their only response is, "we are working on it." It seems that there is no way that the water will be fixed that night. Then, what would you do? Who do you call for help? You may want to call your tour director to complain. Right?

At the end of a long and exhausting day marching under the hot sun, the Israelites arrived at their campsite but there was no water. Taking a shower or even washing one's hands was out of the question. There wasn't even any water for the people to drink. As we would complain to our tour director, "fix the water or get us a new hotel," the Israelites quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink." If you complained to your tour director about the lack of water at the hotel, what would their first response be? The tour director would politely say, "I am so sorry for your inconvenience." However, Moses was not an ordinary tour guide.

Moses bluntly replies, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why are you testing God?” Instead of calming down people’s clamor, Moses fought back against people.

The Israelites were very thirsty and their director seemed unwilling to solve their problem. Then, their complaint turned to a personal attack. “Why did you take us from Egypt and drag us out here with our children and animals to die of thirst?” Some of them were so angry at Moses that they considered stoning him. Physical exhaustion from a long day’s march and thirst... and frustration with an abject situation, one has every right to question, “Is the Lord really with us or not?” In the absence of the material proof of God’s presence, the Israelites complained, argued with and tested the Lord.

## **2<sup>nd</sup> Page We Complain**

We are not very different from the Israelites. God’s leading does not always take us directly toward an oasis. Believing in God doesn’t guarantee “living happily ever after.” Confessing Jesus Christ as our savior does not mean that we have a ticket for a Disease-free, debt-free, painless and prosperous life.

Last Tuesday, I attended the church council meeting for the first time. The meeting lasted only 2 hours but I really enjoyed it because I could sense your love and dedication for the church. Asbury has been faithful to God and you have tried your best to follow God’s lead. Haven’t you? But we also experience financial challenges and declining membership just like all other churches do. We are a faithful church but when things do not turn out to be as we expected... like the Israelites, we also raise the question, “why God?” As the situation gets worse, our superficial question toward God moves to the deeper theological question “Is God really with us or not?”

Have you ever had this experience of doubting, struggling and wrestling with God? I had one. No. Actually, more than one but I will tell you the occasion

that I most deeply struggled with God. As some of you may know, my father was a pastor. He ministered one church for 35 years. I could tell that he was a good man and very faithful Christian. When he passed away in 2009 as the result of an accident, there were about a thousand visitors at his funeral. But he passed away in an unfortunate accident. A sudden snow storm hit a mountain while my father was hiking. At that time, I was preparing for my midterm exams in the United States. When I first heard of his death, my world turned upside down. During my 15 hours trip back to Korea, I could not stop asking God why. “Was God really with him? If God was with him, how could this tragic accident happen to him?” I was angry, frustrated, desperate, and argued with God, asking “is God really with my family or not?”

When we lose a beloved family member in an unexpected moment or in unexpected way, we ask “is God really with us or not?” When our desperate intercession prayer for the recovery of a beloved church member is not answered, we ask “is God really with us?” Despite our sincere prayer for God’s intervention, our beloved denomination is on the verge of division and we cannot stop asking “is God really with us?” When all our efforts to keep our church thriving don’t seem to bear much fruit and our faithful friends keep leaving us, we ask, “is God really with us?” “Is God really with us?”

### **3<sup>rd</sup> page God responded to Israelites’ plight**

If you are struggling with this question, I can assure you that it is o.k. There is nothing wrong with asking this question. In fact, God shaped the Israelites by answering their doubts and their tests of God. According to the biblical timeframe, the Israelites had just been freed from slavery in Egypt. They had had masters and gods who oppressed them, but they had never had God who cared for them. The Israelites didn’t know how to trust God. But by answering their doubts and tests,

God was teaching the Israelites whom to trust and gently nurturing them to trust God.

When people complained to Moses, Moses went back to his boss, God. What did Moses do? Moses was not better than the Israelites. He too complained. He complained about the people: "What shall I do with these people?! Any minute now they'll kill me!" God tells Moses to take his staff and to meet God on the rock at Horeb.

What strikes me in this passage is that God chooses to bring water out of something that appears to be lifeless, a dry and hard rock! God's intention is not death as the Israelites suspect, but rather the process of bringing the people to new life. So, God finds ways to make life flow in unexpected ways: A dry and hard rock! Can you imagine water coming out of a dry and hard rock? Because God saves people in God's own mysterious ways, it requires a certain amount of trust from the people... a willingness to put their faith in God. God is responsive to the needs of the people but God's ways to meet their needs are beyond their imaginations. God turned the waters of the Red Sea into dry land; then God turned bitter water into sweet water at Marah; God rains bread and quail down from the skies to feed the Israelites; and God brings water from the dry rock into the arid wilderness. By answering the people's doubts in God's own ways, God gently shapes and nurtures the Israelites as people of God.

#### **4<sup>th</sup> page God responds to our plight and allows us to experience the presence of Holy Spirit**

In the same way, God shapes us and nurtures us to be God's faithful people. Though sometimes we do not feel the presence of God, God is always with us. God always goes one step ahead of us and stands before us as God stood in front of

Moses on the rock at Horeb. And God brings us life and meets our needs in God's mysterious ways. God nurtures us even through our wilderness experiences.

Many Christians feel that we are walking in the wilderness today. The founding fathers of the United States established this nation on the foundation of Christian values. On the basis of those values, this nation has thrived in many aspects. Ironically, as people become prosperous, they forget God and they don't really care about God because they seem to be able to live their own lives without God. While we try our best to keep our church going, we haven't seen many people joining our church lately. That makes us worry about the future of the church. We don't know how to bring young people back to the church. Even if you invite your sons, daughters, and friends to the church, they don't listen. Right? Constantly inviting them seems like striking a dry rock in the wilderness under the hot sun. It just makes us tired, weary and thirsty. Why doesn't God make them listen? We may feel as if we are left alone in the wilderness without water. We are thirsty. Is God really with us?

But my friends, as God went ahead of Moses and brought life-giving water from a seemingly life-less rock, our God is always ahead of us and stands before us, waiting to bring us new life in God's own ways. Instead of being discouraged, expect wonderful things God will bring to our church. Instead of worrying about the future of the church, let us trust God's promise and dream a great dream for the future of the church. I dream that our church will be full of faithful people once again. I dream that our church will be full of the joyful noise of kids and the vital energy of youth. I dream that many wonderful Christian leaders of this nation will come from Asbury UMC and change the course of this nation and the whole history. I also dream that one day, I can wear a Hawaiian shirt and blue jean during the worship service, instead of a suit. Do you think these dreams can come true? Of course! We can start with the last one.

Don't let the current circumstance determine our future. Dream big! Some say, "God never give you a dream that matches your budget." During the week, please think of "what kind of church we want to be in the next ten years?" and please share it with me.

Don't be discouraged. Keep up your good work and trust God who will bring us living water and quench our thirst in God's own ways. And with faith, keep striking the souls of people around you even if it may seem like we are striking lifeless dry rocks. Keep inviting your friends, sons, daughters, grandchildren to church and to the love of God. As God quenched the thirst of the Israelites with water that came from a dry rock, God will one day make living water gush out from their dried souls and soak not only their souls, but also our church and the world. Don't give up but trust God and keep striking the dry rock. God will work with us. Amen.