

**"IS THE LORD AMONG US OR NOT?"**

Exodus 17:1-7

Do you ever have those times in your life when it is hard for you to trust? To trust another person, or a group, or a government or a process that is being used to get to some conclusion? Now what I have just mentioned are of a human nature. But let me ask you, do you find it hard, at times, to trust God?

Several years ago, September of 1981 to be exact, the **Ladies Home Journal** magazine asked its readers to respond to this very simple question: "In whom do you trust?" Here are the results of that survey- Walter Cronkite, who, by the way for you younger people, was the anchor of a nightly news program- Walter Cronkite received 40% of the vote. The Pope at that time was Pope John Paul- he received 26% of the vote. The great evangelist, Billy Graham received 6% of the vote. And, are you ready for this? God received 3% of the vote. WOW. And that was back in 1981. I wonder what kind of percentage God would get today, in 2008?

Last Sunday we looked at chapter 16 of the book of Exodus and talked about the complaining of the Israelites as they had just begun their wondering in the wilderness after God heard their cries and rescued them out of their captivity in Egypt. And we discussed how they were hungry and thirsty and God provided for them quail every night for dinner and manna every morning for breakfast. And now they have journeyed from the wilderness of Sin. They have camped at Rephidim, but our passage tells us at the end of verse 1, there is no water there for the people to drink. And so the people quarrel with their leader Moses. And Moses comes back with this question in verse 2, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?" But the people were thirsty and they continue complaining and say, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" And so Moses does the only thing he knows to do. Verse 4 says he cried out to the Lord, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me."

Interesting- the word Rephidim in Hebrew signifies "resting place."

You can almost imagine that these Israelites who were spent, thirsty, weary and ready to snap, were looking forward to arriving at Rephidim- this resting place. And just like back in chapter 16 where the water at Marah was bitter, now at Rephidim they experience another hardship- there isn't any water to be found. And so the people are quarreling and they are ready to riot and they are testing the Lord and saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

Wouldn't you say that is a fair question for the Israelites to ask? I mean, if you or I had been there with them, wouldn't we have asked or, OK, been tempted to ask the same question?

So again, as God had done before, He hears and sees the plight of Moses and says to him in verses 5-6, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the

people may drink.' Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel." And so Moses did what God had told him and the water came out of the rock, the people drank and they lived happily ever-after. Right? If you believe this, then do I have some swamp land down in Florida that I want to sell you. Oh, the people did drink but they continued in their wilderness journey and they experienced trials and tribulations, joys and sorrows. Why, they experienced life in all its fullness.

Which brings me back to the question at the end of verse 7 that is the title of my sermon today- "Is the Lord among us or not?" Do we trust the Lord enough to convince us that, as it says in Hebrews 13:5, "[He] will never leave us or forsake us?" And if we pray and do not receive what we desire or want, how will we handle it? Will we take the approach it wasn't in God's plan or He let me down?

Norman Harrison in *His in a Life of Prayer* tells how Charles Inglis, while making the voyage to America a number of years ago, learned from

the devout and godly captain of an experience which he had had... with George Muller of Bristol. It seems that they had encountered a very dense fog. Because of it the captain had remained on the bridge continuously for 24 hours, when Mr. Muller came to him and said, "Captain, I have come to tell you that I must be in Quebec on Saturday afternoon." When informed that it was impossible, he replied: "Very well. If the ship cannot take me, God will find some other way. I have never broken an engagement for 57 years. Let us go down into the chartroom and pray." The captain continues the story thus: "I looked at that man of God and thought to myself, What lunatic asylum could that man have come from. I never heard such a thing as this. 'Mr. Muller,' I said, 'do you know how dense this fog is?' 'No,' he replied, 'my eye is not on the density of the fog, but on the living God, who controls every circumstance of my life.' He knelt down and prayed one of those simple prayers, and when he had finished I was going to pray; but he put his hand on my shoulder and told me not to pray.

'Firstly,' he said, 'because you do not believe God will, and secondly, I believe God has, and there is no need whatever for you to pray about it.' I looked at him, and George Muller said, 'Captain, I have known my Lord for 57 years, and there has never been a single day that I have failed to get an audience with the King. Get up and open the door, and you will find that the fog has gone.' I got up and the fog was indeed gone. George Muller was in Quebec Saturday afternoon for his engagement." From *I Will Lift Up Mine Eyes* by Glenn Clark

Do you catch what George Muller said as to where his eye was focused? He said, "my eye is not on the density of the fog, but on the living God, who controls every circumstance of my life." Wow- what faith, what conviction, what vision.

Now let's just pretend that he had opened the door and the fog was still there. The point that is crucial for me is where his eye was focused- not on the fog but the living God.

So let's just pretend the fog had not been lifted then I believe George Muller would have remained focused on the living God who had other plans, other reasons that George was not privy to. What is crucial for me and I pray for you is keep our eyes on the living God and not always on the issue, the problem, the concern, the joy or the victory.

There are lessons to be learned from this dilemma Moses found himself in. First, **when the problem came up Moses cried out to the Lord.** Moses knew where to turn, or rather who to turn to? He said to the Lord, "What shall I do with this people?" When the problem comes our way do we turn to the Lord and cry out to Him, "What do I do with this" and you fill in the blank. Or when adversity comes our way do we want to blame someone, maybe even God when if we are really honest with ourselves, God didn't create the mess, the issue, the problem, whatever- either we, ourselves did, or someone or something else did.

So instead of blaming God and saying, "Why didn't you do such and such, God, we need to cry out to Him and lean on Him and trust Him.

Second, **found in this passage is a lesson on the right**

**perspective**. During the Civil War there were Christians on both sides of battles- Christians fighting for the North and Christians fighting for the South. One day a clergyman said to Lincoln that he hoped "the Lord was on our side." Listen to Lincoln's reply. He said, "...I know that the Lord is always on the side of the right. But it is my constant anxiety and prayer that I and this nation should be on the Lord's side." *The Inner Life of Abraham Lincoln: Six Months at the White House* by Francis B. Carpenter (Lincoln, Nebraska, University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p. 282.

The right perspective.... You see the people of Israel, just like the people of popular Christianity buy into a popular perversion. We seem ready, no, even eager to invert the true relationship. So instead of saying, "We are Jesus'" or "We are God's," we say "Jesus is ours" or "God is ours."

And in doing so we truly have the wrong perspective. And so, like the captain of the ship that George Muller was traveling on, like the captain, we have our eyes on the wrong thing- our eyes are with the captain focusing on the fog or on ourselves and not on God or Christ. Those Israelites of old wrongly thought that it was God's duty and His business to see that His people were well taken care of and provided readily all, I mean all the things they needed. And that somehow they should of, would of, could have been immune to the difficulties and the hazards of living, time, accident, and environment. And we, at times, are no different than those Israelites, because we can muster up the same thoughts and say with them, "Lord, you have left us" or "Lord you have deserted us." And so maybe we need to take heed to Abraham Lincoln's train of thought and think long and hard and ask, "Am I on the Lord's side?" In other words am I, focusing on the fog or am I focusing on the "living God, who controls every circumstance of my life?"

It will always be an issue of "FAITH" to trust and affirm that God is among us even in the difficult times, the adverse circumstances that either we or others have brought down on us. It will always be an issue of "FAITH" to trust and affirm that God is among us when we feel that God is not listening to us, or we feel cheated or more like a servant, maybe even a Suffering Servant, and when there is no "there in your face" evidence that we are God's, or at least we doubt it. And yet as I was preparing this sermon I was reminded that Jesus had strong words to those who would be sign-seekers when He said in Luke 11:29, "This generation is an evil generation; it asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah." Somehow we want this magical formula that glorifies us and our desires and what we want rather than the formula of faith which, in my reading of scripture, only glorifies God and the forgiveness and ultimate healing of all our problems and woes and bitterness.

Rick Warren's words ring true, in the opening chapter of his book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, his very first words are, "It's not about you." Which leads me to my third point which is **God says to us I will be with you on my terms**. You see, our world's response to all of this and to our God is, "Be with us on our terms" or "be with me on my terms." God would tell us not to keep our eyes on the fog but on Him, for when our eyes are fixed on Him, the one who controls every circumstance of our lives, when adversity comes will not be tempted to say with our brothers and sisters in the wilderness, "Is the Lord among us or not?" but rather we will be able to affirm, "Yes He is. He is with us in the gift of walking up this morning; He is with us as we traveled to worship Him today; He is with us in this time to give back to Him in worship; He is with us when we failed that test that we studied so hard for; He is with us when we weren't paying attention and maybe talking on the cell phone and we were in a fender-bender; He is with us when we are told we have cancer; He is with us when our loved one dies;

He was with us before we were born and when we were born and when we cut our first tooth and when we started Kindergarten and when we went to our first dance and when we graduated from school and when we had our first child and when we got that job we wanted so badly and when we were let go from that job after all those years and when we hit middle age and the twilight years and when we were sick and dying and when we crossed over into heaven. Never doubt that He is among us. So this week, if and when you begin to doubt or question, if and when you want to throw in the towel, if and when you wonder- does God really care, is He even here?- just say these three simple words- YES HE IS, YES HE IS. What are those words? YES HE IS. Even say it out loud to someone, surprise them with your 3 words and then tell them about the one who IS. Who knows, maybe they will make Him theirs as well. Amen.

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Introduction: Do you ever have those times in your life when it is hard for you to trust?

*Ladies Home Journal*, 1981- "In whom do you trust?" Walter Cronkite-\_\_%; Pope John Paul-\_\_%; Billy Graham-\_\_%; God\_\_%

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Second, **found in this passage is a lesson on the right \_\_\_\_\_**

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"Jesus is ours" or "God is ours"

Third, **God says to us I will be with you on my \_\_\_\_\_**

Conclusion: So this week when you feel..., when you begin to doubt or question, if and when you want to throw in the towel, if and when you wonder- does God really care, is He even here?- just say these three simple words- YES HE IS.