

Two to Quarrel (Exodus 17: 1-7)

I Humanism in the Israelites obstructed their vision of God. (Let us review, momentarily, what that vision was, and was not. They knew that there was a God in Heaven and that their ancestors had enjoyed a special relationship with God, which other people in the world did not enjoy. They had a collective memory of a Covenant relationship with God, and they symbolized their participation in that Covenant with circumcision, and with animal sacrifices to atone for sins. It is also instructive to consider what that vision did *not* include. For example, they knew that Noah had cursed Canaan, the son of Ham, saying that the descendants of Canaan would serve the descendants of Shem, and their sense of identity included a vague desire to make good on the curse; but there were no firm details about how to make that happen until Moses came along. They had a vague understanding of the importance of animal sacrifices in worship; but if humanity ever understood the significance of vicarious atonement as a Messianic model, that understanding did not shape the collective consciousness of the Children of Israel. Perhaps most sadly, they did not yet know any sense of responsibility to unite their corporate will with the Will of God and become the instruments of His purpose (as opposed to their own purpose), in order to reveal the glory of God in the world, by the administration of the Kingdom of God in the world.)

A Chapter 17 is an account of yet another example of their lack of faith. (It should be obvious to us, with our New Testament perspective, that faith meant something different in Old Testament Israel than it means in the New Testament Church. We believe, for example, that we have correct faith when we believe the Doctrines of Soteriology (the Life and Work of Jesus) and Pneumatology (what the Bible—not the charismatic churches—teaches about the Holy Spirit, and Eschatology (the End of Time and the Second Coming of Jesus). For Old

Testament Israel, though, correct faith was related to their participation in the Covenant God had established in Abraham, by the circumcision of their sons and the animal sacrifices. If it were possible to ask them, they would no doubt tell us that they *all* had correct faith in their Covenant Relationship with God, because all of them were children of Abraham (at least they believed what they thought they understood about it); and that as long as Moses was performing miracles on God's behalf then they had faith in him as God's prophet too.

Is that so different from us, who believe what we think we understand (or at least, what we think we can explain) about New Testament theology, and who have faith in Jesus as long as the manifestation of His Grace is obvious to us? We would say that correct faith on their part should have been independent of the way they planned to make good on Noah's curse of Canaan, and that correct faith on the part of the New Testament believer should be independent of his ability to explain the Grace of God to the satisfaction of a rational humanist. In that case then, whose faith *is* correct? We *might* begin to see then, that most of the Children of Israel, and most New Testament believers have *imperfect* faith. Perfectly correct faith was absent in the Israelites, and if we are honest, we must admit that it is absent from most New Testament Christians, too.)

B The faith of a believer is that we will live forever in Heaven with God.

(Let us define faith thus so as to distinguish it from our intellectual understanding of the doctrines of the institutional churches, for these are in fact little more than rational sounding explanations of what we read in the Bible. In other words, what we read in the Bible should be more important, and take precedence, over what we hear (or think we have heard) in Sunday School lessons and sermons. For example, we all know that someday, we all will die. Then what? We all would say that we hope to live forever in Heaven with our Heavenly Father. Now why

do we think that we will be so blessed? It is because of what we read in the Bible, about Eternal life for Believers who trust the Grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ, who came to earth to reveal the Grace of God to humanity, to die to redeem humanity from sin, Who rose from the dead to justify our faith, and Who returned to Heaven and sent the Holy Spirit to give the church its life. Is it not curious that most believers share these ideas, regardless of the church in which they hold membership? It ought not to surprise us because most churches have (historically, at least) built sound doctrines upon scriptural foundations. Now before we go further, let us stipulate that Heaven is God's Home, and that He has the Creator's privilege of deciding whom to admit into it, and whom to exclude. That, then, sets up a quarrel between people and God, and we must not presume that *we* are smart enough or strong enough to win that quarrel.)

II The first party in a quarrel wants something to be different than it is, or is likely to be, or become. So we think of an alternative that would please us better, and describe what we want in terms that sound the least selfish and most altruistic as we can manage. And who is to say that the selflessness or altruism we hope to express makes our alternative to reality a good or bad idea? First, creating the greatest good for the greatest number of people is an inadequate justification for our humanism, because 49% (or even .49%) dissatisfaction is still far short of perfect peace and harmony; second, only God is good, and so only God can create something that is 100% good for everyone. Also, in the very unlikely case that humanity could achieve 100% agreement on anything (short of 100% holiness), then even perfect peace and harmony would still be sin in the eyes of God. We might note here that the liberals' way to achieve peace and harmony is to agree to disagree, but liberals only suggest this after they have set the order and created the conditions about which we disagree.)

A (Now let us get back to our Bible story.) Some Israelites took extra water with them from Elim. (So who did the grumbling and complaining? People complain because they are uncomfortable, or worried about something. No one complained about having water while they were at Elim. They started grumbling when water became harder to find; and complaining when they couldn't find enough of it. We might note that if one family or another had better discipline about water conservation then the water in their barrels lasted a little longer than that of those who wasted it. And perhaps some of the wastefulness came from the presumption that God would bless them with abundant resources regardless of how they behaved, as many contemporary believers presume that God will bless them (or their churches) with abundant prosperity in spite of their selfish egoism. Yet in such a barren place, no one could conserve their water reserves indefinitely. God intended to take them to a place where all their reserves would fail, to teach them to depend on His Providence.

He teaches similar lessons to us. If we learn the best and most sophisticated answers to the hardest questions, God can send someone to us with a question that we have not studied for. If we pursue material abundance until the pursuit itself consumes all our time and resources God can send a financial crisis that can bankrupt every economy in the world. If we hoard our manna God knows how to send maggots and if we respect His rules He can even protect us from maggots. God knows how to put us in a position where our best preparations, plans, and efforts will all fail, so that we must depend upon His resources for our needs; and then He reveals His resources to us. And do you know where to find God's resources? They are all in Jesus. That's where we need to go, and to stay.)

B As supplies diminished, quarrels increased. (Now for as long as the kids could still go to old *Aunt Hey You* for a drink of water, and for as long as old

Uncle Who Me had enough water for his donkeys and yours too, they might grumble a little about why the kids own parents and the donkey's own owners didn't take care of them, but they probably shared. The grumbles became complaints as supplies began to diminish; and the complainers sought arbitration (from Moses) when there was no longer enough to share. Again we note that, in his role as a prophet and as a model of Christ, Moses identified with God well enough to ask them why they were complaining against God; as in Chapter 16, he was only following God and so their complaints about his leadership were really complaints about God's leadership. (And we need to emphasize again, as we did last week, that the only other person who has ever lived who could identify himself with God like this was Jesus. There is no pastor in any church to whom God has given such a privilege; if he arrogates it for himself he commits a sin of presumption; and people who follow his *non*-leadership have a sin of delusion.)

So Moses responded in Chapter 17 as he did in Chapter 16. "Why are you quarrelling with me? Why do you put the Lord to the test?" It seems reasonable to wonder, then, what took Moses so long to cry out to God? The lesson for us, here, is that as soon as Moses asked God for help God showed Him where to find water. Several New Testament passages come to mind, then, that teach us of the compassion of Christ for us, and the presence of Christ with us, even unto the end of the world. We ought not to wait for the next crisis to cry out to God. Let us seek Him now, and in the place where He can be found: Bible study and prayer.)

C God intervened when the crisis reached its climax. (God could have made water come out of any rock in that whole desert, or even sent a thunderstorm with enough rain to fill every empty water barrel and canteen in the camp, but He didn't. God wanted the Israelites to exhaust all their own reserves of water; He even wanted Moses to realize that there was absolutely nothing that he could do

to help his people. Only then would they all recognize that the Hand of God had made yet another miracle for them. Why did God wait until people were quarrelling with each other and with Moses, and allow all of the bitterness and resentment that such strife engenders? We know that God knew that this would happen in the same way that He knew how Moses would respond to the burning bush and that Pharaoh would not listen to Moses. *Our* ability to understand the future is limited by our understanding of the laws of cause and effect, specifically with respect to the *effects* our own behavior (or misbehavior) *cause* for other people. Now God is not limited by our understanding, or even by the laws of cause and effect, for that matter. So God knew that the Israelites would run out of water and complain; He knew that Moses would turn to Him and cry for help; and He knew what He would do when all this played out in the drama of human affairs. To put this in another way, God tested the faith of the Israelites, knowing that the results of the test would be their testing of Him. God was prepared to pass that, or any other, test.

There is a test for us too. It is a test of our love for Him, and of the way we express that love. If we pass our test, then we will grow a little in grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ; if we fail, God knows how to provide us with all the remedial practice we need until we get it right. Can we see the role of grumbling and complaining now? These actions create bitterness and resentment in our spirits, as they no doubt did in the Israelites. So how do we prove our love for God? We do it by showing His love to others: for example, the people whose past conduct has made us bitter and resentful. We pray every week for God to forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors; how dare we pray thus and then expect to receive His forgiveness on any other terms?

As we pointed out last week, most of us in our small group have probably

learned these lessons already, although we might not always anticipate how the lessons apply in our lives. Here, then, is that next crisis that looms before us, in the coming weeks and months: we need to be the voice of Jesus, challenging those who have not yet learned about forgiveness to start forgiving, because the healing they need for the bitterness and resentment in their spirits can only come from the love of God, as they show that love to others in forgiveness.

III The second party in a quarrel can solve the problem. (In Exodus 17, Moses was a rather reluctant second party in the quarrel; but he was the second party all the same because he was the Prophet of God. For God, there was nothing to quarrel about; God could make all the water He wanted to make, from absolutely nothing if He had to, as He did in Genesis Chapter 1. The Israelites were the first party. They wanted things to be different. They resented the discomforts and the inconveniences they now endured because of Moses, and complained because things were getting worse instead of better. God had the ability to solve their problem, but would He? Such was the nature of their test of God. God knew what He was going to do: He was going to make them into the great nation He had promised to Abraham. God knew why and how He would do this too: God intended to reveal His Glory to the nations of the earth by making the Israelites the administrators of His Covenant. Old Testament Israel tested God in the same way modern man does: by trying to make God into the instrument of their own agendas, and failing to do so, to accomplish their own agenda without God. God passed (and still passes) His test by being God; Israel failed (and modern man fails) by being human. God does things His Way; we quarrel because we want Him to do our things, and do them our way. He won't, and that is the quarrel!)

A The second party has to make two decisions quickly. (The two decisions are readily identifiable. First, the second party has to decide whether he is, in fact,

able to solve the problem which is represented by the quarrel. Second, he has to decide whether he is willing to use the resources at his disposal for that purpose. Now in the case of Moses, he knew that he, himself, could do nothing, and his cry to God was one of desperation. For His part, God knew that He had the ability to solve the water problem, and He knew precisely when and how to do so in order to reveal His Glory. Incidentally, God also knew when the Israelites were ready to accept His Solution to their problem too, and which of them would learn the lessons He intended to teach them by this crisis.)

B God's solution to our problems is Jesus. (He is the Living Water, from the Rock of Ages, just like He was the manna in Chapter 16 last week. Jesus was God's solution to the water problem for Israel. As we have noted in previous messages, this is probably easier for us to understand than it was for them. Jesus said (Matthew 5:6): *Blessed are they that hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.* Then do we get righteousness wherewith to be filled? It comes only if God imputes righteousness to us, by our faith in Jesus. This is a very important consideration for the New Testament believer, because the fruit of humanism in our spirits is our sinful nature; on the other hand, righteousness is the fruit of the Grace of God as He sanctifies us by the work of His Holy Spirit. The two fruits cannot grow on the same vine, e.g., in the same spirit. So God solved the water deficit problem for the Israelites by giving them the Living Water, Who is Jesus; Jesus was life from God for Israel. He solves our righteous deficit problem for us by imputing the righteousness of Christ to us; Jesus is the only One with any righteousness (e.g., the complete absence of sin), to impute.)

C Too many people don't like to do things God's Way. (The Israelites would not really have been better off to stay in Egypt, they only thought that it was so when they saw how arduous their trip to the Promised Land would be. They no

doubt thought that different leadership in Egypt could have persuaded Pharaoh to treat them better; or that different leadership in the desert would take them to the Promised Land by a different route (how could fighting a battle against the Philistines be any worse than enduring hunger and thirst?)—and where was God, anyway? They thought that if God really loved them and cared about them, He would surely make their lives easier; therefore Moses must surely have missed a turn somewhere, and God was nowhere near the place Moses had taken them. Again, we see a remarkable parallel to our New Testament experience. Does God really love us? Then why doesn't He make our lives easy and comfortable, and make all our adversaries submit contritely to us? How can we know that our leaders really follow God when our church is so small? If God truly reveals Himself in Scripture then why does my devotional time (Q.T.) leave me with more questions than answers?

Let us say again that God's answer to all these problems is Jesus. If we read the Bible and pray and still have no answers it is because we are looking for an answer that is *not* Jesus, Who is the Word of God. If our church is and remains small it is because we are gathered in the name of Jesus and not in the name of the institutional church. God demonstrates His love and care for us by providing for all our needs (if not for all our desires); He blesses us with material prosperity in a proportion that reflects our ability to be the instruments of His Blessing in the lives of those around us. Then let us *seek* for the Kingdom of God and His Righteousness in our devotional lives; let us ask whether we *want* to be part of the hypocrisy that passes for religion in churches where sons succeed fathers to leadership in the same way that princes succeed kings; and let us ask ourselves if we are willing *literally* to leave behind everything we have for the Kingdom of God, daily, or if selfishness precludes sacrifice of anything but Sunday mornings.)

IV (Can we see then that God has a quarrel with humanity, especially in the New Testament?) The Spirit of God will not strive with man forever. (That came from Genesis 6:3. God is the first party, in the only quarrel that really matters, because He wants to change things—us, in particular; and we are the second party in the quarrel because we truly have the ability to solve the problem, by surrendering our wills (individually and corporately) to the Will of God.)

A For the Believer, God is the first party in our quarrel (because, when we first meet Jesus as our Savior, all He finds is a dead carcass, so to speak, of a human soul, in which the Holy Spirit plants a seed, which, given time, will grow into the image of Jesus. Now for that to happen we have to nourish that new life with the Bread of Life and the Living Water, which is Jesus. The Holy Spirit is prepared to do that; but are we prepared to allow Him to do so? We *think* that we are. We repented sin, after all, and professed faith in Jesus, did we not? Yet our human wills have had a lifetime of practice. What did they practice? Our human wills practice nourishing the humanistic spirit in us, with comforts and conveniences for carnal, temporal lives. Now our will also has strength; you can test this by trying to persuade a child to sit still and listen quietly in church, or trying to persuade a teenage boy to get a respectable haircut, or trying to persuade an adult to change TV or computer game habits (or their alcohol or tobacco habits). As long as the human will does not feel threatened, we get along O.K. with some very benign Jesus who loves everyone and promises to take everyone to Heaven whether they repent and forsake sin or not. But that benign Jesus is not Biblical. The real Jesus starts changing us into Children of God.

He finds a dead soul that is animated by the humanistic spirit; and the Holy Spirit of God cannot co-habit any soul in which the humanistic spirit still makes all the decisions about life (and lifestyles); He would not be the *Holy* Spirit if He

did. So we must make a conscious decision, by an act of our will, to surrender our wills to the sovereignty of our Lord Jesus Christ (that is the meaning of *Lord*, after all), and allow the Holy Spirit of God to displace and replace the humanistic spirit in us with the Holy Spirit of God. This is the way we mature as Christians, but the human will guards against that surrender very carefully, because it means the death of the ego.)

B (So) the second party in our quarrel is the egoism of humanity. (According to I John 1:8, *If we say we have no sin* (because Jesus redeemed us from sin, and the Holy Spirit is sanctifying us, and so on) *we deceive ourselves and the Truth is not in us.* Every time our humanistic spirit resists the Spirit of God we commit another sin, against the sovereignty of our Lord Jesus Christ. It must be repented and forsaken too. So we see that *we ourselves also were sometimes foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving divers lusts and pleasures* (Titus 3:3). So even we believers can deceive ourselves with foolishness and disobedience because our soul still retains the presence of the humanistic spirit, which has a strong instinct for self-preservation. It requires an act of the will to surrender our will to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, to eject the human spirit from its seat at the center of our decision-making process, to *die to self so that we might live for Christ*, and to allow the Holy Spirit to conform us to the image of the Son of God. Now for the new believer this is a hard thing to comprehend, but given some experience with Jesus we learn that on our journey to our Promised Land, God will provide all the Bread of Life and Living Water that we need, but *not* all the pizza and coca-cola we want to enjoy, just as He did for the Children of Israel. We have to leave the relative security and comforts of Egypt and *egyptian-ness* behind, just like they did. We have to follow the lead of Jesus just like they had to follow the lead of Moses. It takes two to quarrel: God wants to make these changes in our lives, and

we have the power to permit the changes (by surrendering our wills to His), but we prefer to hold onto what is familiar and comfortable to our humanistic spirit. May God help us to have *correct* faith!)

C The resolution of the quarrel is still Jesus. (Jesus was the solution to the quarrel between the Israelites and God, in the form of Manna and Water from the Rock. They ate the manna and drank the water and lived; and note this: they lived in spite of the discomforts and inconveniences they found in the desert. Jesus is the solution to our quarrel with God too. The Holy Spirit plants the seed of Christ in us when we are born again. That seed is fertile! God is life, and the author of life. That seed cannot help but to grow. The only thing that can prevent that Seed of Christ from reaching maturity in us is our refusal to surrender our wills to the Will of God. The human spirit has a strong instinct for self-preservation, and given the collaboration of the human will, it can choke out the seed of Christ by depriving it of nourishment by Bread of Life and Living Water. So we say again that all of us are all necessary to one another, to help each another become better Christians: not by accepting excuses for impenitence and rationalizing stubbornness, but by challenging one another to live for Jesus.)

V We should never be confused by questions about how God does things. (There will certainly be times when ungodly people try to confuse the issues in defense of their own humanism, asking us questions that they think we can't answer; and questions about *why* and *how* might even silence us because of our ignorance. Even the most biblical answers seem inadequate to our human intelligence; yet the only correct answer is still *Jesus*. God created everything that is, and sustains it all, by means of His Word, and the Word of God is our Lord, Jesus Christ. So Jesus is the all-sufficient grace of God that provided Manna and Water for the Children of Israel in the desert; Jesus is the *author and finisher of our faith*

(Hebrews 12:2); He is our counselor, our healer, and the mold which the Holy Spirit will use to conform us to His image, and our eternal hope and Salvation. May God help us to learn Jesus so well that we can introduce Him to the world as the solution God has provided, to every problem of all humanity.)

A If we understand the “how” then we also know the “why”. (Why God does anything is obvious enough to us who read the New Testament; perhaps it is not so obvious to unbelievers. Their ignorance becomes our problem when God makes our paths cross theirs. Then God expects us to allow Him to speak to unbelievers by using our voices. We need to be able to tell them that Jesus came to earth to reveal God to men, that Jesus died to redeem humanity from sin, and that Jesus arose from the dead to justify our faith in the Grace of God; and we need to live a lifestyle that demonstrates unequivocally that our testimony is true. In short, the reason for everything God says and does is Jesus; let Him be our reason too.)

B Jesus said that we must lose our lives (for His sake) in order to save them. (We must remember that the human soul is dead; it died because of the Original Sin in the Garden of Eden. The humanistic spirit feeds on the dead carcass of the dead soul, and the spirit of humanism keeps that carcass bloated with things that make our human spirits happy and comfortable. This is the life that we must lose for Jesus. His Holy Spirit wants to change us, but our humanistic spirits resist the changes. We must lose our lives to save them; and while the Spirit of God is patient with us, He will not be so forever. So let us resolve to accept and to implement God’s solution to the quarrel between God and man: and God’s solution to that, and every other problem, is Jesus.)