

Numbers 14:5-24, 'Caleb – Giving Support'**By Ian Olliver**

I had the kind of childhood that I would not wish on anyone. Not that I was unique....far from it. I was 7 years old when I had my first day working in the quarry. Of course I was too young to be there wielding a pickaxe or hauling the heavy blocks of stone out on to the waiting carts so my job was to mend ropes. I learned the knots. I learned how to weave the reeds together to make something strong enough to take weight and flexible enough be useful to the men who worked. The sun was setting as we finished up each day. The cool of the evening would have been a far better time to work really, but our Egyptian masters wanted us there in the daylight where they could keep close watch to ensure that everyone was working properly and productively. It was only my third day there when I first witnessed a whipping handed down by one of the slave masters. The shrieks of pain as the flesh was torn from his back was so traumatic that I cried through the whole night... nothing my parents could say would console me....we were slaves... It had been that way for as long as anyone could remember. Every day my heart ached with the injustice of it all.... But every day I channelled my frustrations into the work. As my body grew stronger so the work grew harder to match it. Some evenings songs would be sung and stories would be told of a powerful God who had chosen us to be his special people....I don't think that anyone really believed that anymore.

Until Moses arrived.

I mean we all knew about Moses. The rumour had always been that the big brother of Aaron and sister Miriam was growing up in the royal palace and that one day he would set us all free. Except that he didn't. One crazy day in a fit of rage he killed an Egyptian slave master....and then fled.

That was 40 years ago. We had almost forgotten he existed. We assumed he must have got lost or starved in the desert....But he is back.... And my goodness strange things are happening. A few weeks ago the river Nile turned to blood apparently, though I find that very hard to believe. Since then all sorts of weird events have been happening. We were overrun with frogs. They got everywhere Beds kitchen you could hardly walk without treading on one. Incessant croaking and the just as you are getting to sleep suddenly a slimy damp body leaps on to your face.

Then it got more serious, flies, lice, locusts, boils. Corps destroyed, livestock decimated. Awful for the Egyptians, but to be honest worse on us. Moses warned Pharoah that these disasters would happen and that they were Gods judgement on the way in which the Egyptians had been treating us all these years.

Pharoah's response.... If the Hebrews are making life more difficult for the Egyptians, then we'll make life more difficult for the Hebrews.

What we are expected to do now is basically humanly impossible. I know that some folks have been trying to make Moses desist... But I'm proud that he is continuing to fight our cause. Then the storm last night. Hail like you would not believe - stones like golf balls being

hurled down from the sky like bullets devastating the remaining crops and bringing death and injury to those poor unfortunate souls who were unlucky enough to be caught up in it.

Moses came into our camp and warned us that the final plague was going to be so much more than all that had gone before. Death to the firstborn in every family whether human or animal. We knew it would be at full moon....and we knew what we had to do. Slaughter a lamb. Put its blood on our doorposts and then roast it and share the feast with everyone who shelters in our house until the angel of death passed over.

I remember the fear and exhilaration when that night came. We knew that this was now or never, make or break from our time as slaves. We carefully prepared our home and the meal as Moses had described it.....and waited.

The shouts and screams that floated across to our camp were as bad as anything I had heard in my life as a slave. But never before had the prayers and shouts and curses been uttered in the Egyptian language as they were that night.

This was our moment... our time to flee. The Exodus had begun and we headed out east towards the rising sun. Hundreds, then thousands then tens of thousands in bewildered yet joyful procession leaving the land that had held us captive for so long.

None of us had any idea as to what lay beyond. Yet Moses was confident.. He had been that way before. He knew where God was leading us.. To a new land, a fertile land, a promised land...a place we could call home.

We reached the edge of an expanse of water. The distant shore too far to swim. Perhaps the plan was to set up camp and build boats and rafts to get across..... But then we got word that the Pharaoh had had a change of heart. Instead of being cowed by the power of our God he became enraged that these people who had been responsible for bringing so much calamity should escape.

We were trapped. Nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. Hundreds of thousands of unarmed slaves.

Moses took charge. He prayed with a voice and an authority which took us all by surprise and as he waded into the water so the water retreated. I've never seen anything like it. It look wonderful. It looked incredible. It looked like hope. The whole nation followed and reached the other side on dry seabed. Wow. And as the last Israelite stepped on to the shore so the water slipped back into its rightful place engulfing the Egyptian army. What a day...what a God!

What a night of celebration and worship and praise followed. Songs were sung....we were just overcome by this euphoria that the years of oppression were finally over, a new chapter could begin.

We were at the other side of the sea.... Which was, and still is, a desert. Crossing it by himself was ok for Moses, returning with half a million others was quite a different thing. Within a couple of days food and water was nearly run out and by day 3 the people were complaining that their lives were better in Egypt. Talk about fickle!

But what a God we serve. Moses led us to water and God provided food- this special desert bread we called manna along with flocks of quail. We began to adapt to this new and bizarre way of life. Moses taught us more about our God and his promises. He explained that God had saved us so that we could become a new kind of people. To prevent us from slipping back into a slavery mindset God began to give us laws to live by to ensure that we would not become a people who oppress people, but that we would be a distinctive nation known for our love and generosity -reflecting the generous god who had saved us from so much and blessed us with so much.

After about a year some of us were selected to spy out the land which God had promised to us. Just one person from each tribe. I was the representative from Judah. We set off north. Certainly the land we came to was glorious. Streams ran down from the hillsides. The soil was fertile. The size of the fruit and veg which was being grown looked truly delicious. Not surprisingly the folk who lived there also appeared strong and healthy. Some of them looked at least twice the size of any of us. But what a land. Sunny, warm yet lush and green. Plenty of places to graze flocks... plenty of places to build homes and villages. But also clearly these were not content or peaceful people. The towns were heavily fortified and we could see plenty of evidence of unrest and everyone seemed to be carrying a weapon of some kind. Pleasant and unpleasant at the same time. We spent 40 days exploring. Sometimes together, sometimes splitting into smaller groups so we could get a good picture of the land. I was really excited for the opportunities the land could have for us.

We came back to the desert camp to report back our findings to Moses and the whole nation.

We gave a detailed report of all that we saw. I asked for silence and I spoke up. Look everyone. God has brought us out of Egypt, he has blessed us with the law, and now he has given us the opportunity to live in this incredible land. Let's go for it!

But then, inexplicably, Shammua from the tribe of Reuben and Gaddiel from Zebulun stood up and said. The folks up there are blood thirsty and fierce. Their towns are so well fortified and they are so used to war that we would never stand a chance against them. Shaphat from Simeon joined in. It is a great land, but a really bad idea, we are much safer here. Sethur from Naphtali agreed. To invade the land would be to suffer huge casualties. If you don't die in the battles ahead you can be sure that your sons and brothers will. It's not a chance worth taking.....In fact from the lot of them it was only Joshua from the tribe of Ephraim who backed me up.

I couldn't believe it. After all the amazing things that God had brought us through they were saying this stuff. The consensus seemed to be that it was all just too dangerous and the nation was ill-prepared and ill-equipped to take the land. Some even started saying that the sensible thing would be to give up now and head back across the sea to Egypt. I couldn't believe it!

Moses went away to speak with God. The news he returned with was devastating. The spies went out for 40 days and came back with their report. Because of the fear and unbelief of them and this nation no-one will set foot into this promised land for 40 years. You

will all live and die in the desert- the only ones who will step into the land will be Caleb and Joshua 40 years from now.

Everyone was devastated by the news. 40 years a slave and now after all the signs and wonders and miracles and hope we have witnessed 40 years sentenced to live as nomads in the desert.

The ten others who were sent as spies were struck down with plague and as the years rolled by so the nation changed. A new generation was born and those I had worked alongside as I grew up died of illness, weariness and old age. Just me and Joshua left. But when the time came and Moses was close to death I knew that it was for Joshua to lead the people and for me to give him all the support and encouragement I could. We were determined that this time the land would be for our holy God and our Holy nation.

So we led the nation across the Jordan river on miraculous dry ground, just as we had once been led across the red sea. Yes taking the land was hard. Yes the cities were well fortified, yes we had some casualties... but God was with us. We saw his power at work as Jericho fell, we saw his hands at work on the day that the Amorite army was decimated by a freak hailstorm. Cities were conquered and kings were vanquished. Sadly not every battle was fought externally. Time and again our own people would have an idea to steal some plunder or be disobedient to God in some way. The battles and campaigns lasted years and Joshua and I were old and worn out. Joshua and I have been the only really faithful ones through all of this. And Joshua has given me this place to be an inheritance for me and my descendants. I will call the place beloved of God, for that is who I am. Or in our language "Hebron" May it be a town synonymous with peace and justice for generations to come.

I don't know....Fighting and fighting and fighting. That has been the story of my life. Every day was a new challenge. We were instructed to purge the land from idolatry. To make the land a Holy Land. A land filled with the love and the Laws of God. So yes we dispatched the cruel and evil Amorites and Canaanites and Perizzites and Jebusites... And what have we now? Our own people who still lie and cheat and steal and dishonour God. Me... I now just long for peace.

Joshua has done his best to do as his name suggests and be a saviour to the tribes of Israel. Yes we have been set free from the nations whose Godless ways prevented us from becoming the people who truly followed the Lord God....and yet I have discovered that the enemy was never really out there... the real enemy is in here. The heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart. How I pray and long for a rescuer who can finally deal with our constant propensity to ignore the instructions God and the needs of our neighbours which always leads to pain and conflict and sadness. Maybe someday God will raise up a rescuer like that. Someone who can finally deal with the problems of sin and pain and death once and for all. He may not come in my lifetime. But I do believe that a great saviour- the Messiah will one day come... and when he does, I'm sure that I would worship him and follow him. Imagine that day when the powers of sin and death are conquered forever. What a day! I'm sure then the whole world will believe and be at peace when **He** comes! What do you think?