

In my previous career, a lot of the guys I worked with were into their fitness big style. A bit like some of the guys in St John's, they enjoyed mountain climbing and the great outdoors. Anyway, the Company every year entered a UK-wide extreme athletes event. It involved orienteering, cycling, swimming, kayaking, mental agility, everything you can think of over 3 days. We would be competing against the likes of Microsoft and ICI and Barclays – all the big corporations. And so when it came to putting the team together, in some bizarre turn of events I was selected for the team. It's hard to quite describe how bad it was – we were based around Snowdonia, and after day 1 I honestly thought I was going to die. It just felt like constant attack on all parts of my body. I hurt all over and every few hours felt like a child who wanted to go home to his mum and dad. Surprisingly we completed the competition and I think out of 100 companies, we came 40<sup>th</sup> which wasn't that bad. I can remember on the final day we were in the middle of an off-road biking exercise with map reading thrown in, and ahead of us was this rather steep incline. My body, in particular my legs gave up as I tried to grasp the enormity of the task. Luckily and slightly embarrassingly I remember one of my team mates lifting me onto his back as he climbed the steep incline while pushing my bike in his other hand. It was the last time I took part in the event.

Anyway the point of telling you all of this, was the sheer sense of struggle that I felt. It was punishing. Whilst we don't all have to go through these types of events, all of us in life have maybe encountered some major issue where we have felt so under attack and really feeling like giving up. Life is wonderful in so many ways, but there are times where attack comes, and it is sometimes hard to keep going – it could be attack on our health, our relationships, and at present I have a friend who is feeling the attack in work. Struggle and attack is inevitable in life, but we hope it doesn't come to us. Whilst we hope to avoid these in life, there is one attack that every Christian should expect to be under regularly, and that is spiritual attack. No Christian will avoid this. And as a Christian, if we don't experience spiritual attack then there's something wrong.

Ever since the dawn of time, those who have chosen to follow the call of God in their lives, to follow his commands, have been open to the attack, the lies of Satan, because let's not kid ourselves in thinking he doesn't exist – he is everywhere today, pulling people further and further away from the God who loves us.

In recent years I think one of the most obvious spiritual attacks that has come on God's people was COVID. It drove people into their homes, church buildings had to close, and although many churches found new ways of communicating into the community, it now has left a hole as those who used to gather regularly each Sunday now don't, or they gather less often.

And now that people have become used to not gathering in the way they did, it becomes extremely difficult to reinstate the pattern of the past. There are plenty of things that now seem much more interesting on a Sunday – after all the services are posted online now so no one misses it, you don't even have to watch it on a Sunday if you've something else to do.

All of this is clever ploy of Satan and his armies waging a war on society, where today, most people would not consider the church any longer an important societal influence. That's one type of spiritual attack that is going on today, that is diverting people from drawing close to God and making him a priority.

Governments and societies around the world are doing all they can to put Christianity into a locked box. Today when Christians begin to do anything that advances God's Kingdom,

then you can be sure that opposition and attack will come their way. When Christians speak out and protest on policies and laws implemented by the Government, then we are labelled and persecuted more and more. In contrast, if a Church community remains quiet in the town square, then everything will seem harmonious and great. You see, those little churches that are doing nothing in their communities are absolutely no threat to society, but the churches that are speaking out about certain things, that's when trouble starts. Satan has been able to influence the values in our society so much that things that are contrary to God's laws have been normalised. It's that spiritual attack that we see in scripture regularly.

When Jesus spoke against the hypocrisy of some of the Jewish leaders and Pharisees, there was an uprising of people who plotted to kill him because of how he was gathering people to him and away from them. When Peter & Paul spoke about the risen Jesus, they often were whipped and put into prison. Even Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 6 with these words, "as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; <sup>5</sup> in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger".

So life as a Christian, if lived in the way that scripture describes it, will bring much opposition and pain. And today we are going to think a little more about the attack that comes on today's Christian.

You may remember last week if you were here that we followed the life of Joseph, at how reunion with his brothers had begun, and as you know the story well, there is a happy ending. Today as we pick up our reading, everything was going well. The Israelites after Joseph's death were doing well – they were multiplying in numbers, and yet all was not well with the Egyptians. Remember the parallels with my earlier thoughts – as God's plans were being fulfilled and his promises of blessing were so evident, God's people were met with opposition. Remember that anything where God brings blessing, it will automatically face opposition. It wasn't that God had decided to pick a fight with Pharaoh, it was him picking a fight with God. Pharaoh as we know resents God's demands, he hates God's purposes, and he opposes anyone who would align themselves to God. And in today's society it is no different. God isn't picking a fight with society, society is picking a fight with God, and yet society doesn't seem to understand that in the end God will be victorious.

So let's see how the story unfolds and what we can learn from it.

There's a new ruler in town. He doesn't recognise what has gone before him – he doesn't realise the incredible blessing that Joseph has brought to the land. Instead Pharaoh sees a threat from God's people – they're too numerous, and he believes that if they join with his enemies they could overturn the nation of Egypt. In other words he's thinking, God's people are in danger of setting the standards – we don't want to be told how things should be, we want to determine our own future. Who is God to tell us how to live our lives. We've got to silence these followers of God. And so Pharaoh hatches a plan which places the people into forced labour.

Pharaoh's acting against God's plans by persecuting his people. Verse 14 says that the Egyptians made the people's lives bitter with harsh labour in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields, working them ruthlessly. Isn't there such a contrast already. We know that God had been blessing his people, in provision and in number, and now those that hate God are pushing back against that. Joseph at one point had been considered the most important man of the land, and now his people are being trodden on. Hatred is rising in the Egyptians to the point that in verse 12 it says that they dreaded the Israelites.

You see this is the pattern I've said already exists throughout all of history. It started when in Genesis 1 God had a perfect plan, which Satan comes to break apart, God blesses the Israelites, but Satan uses leaders to bring them down; God provides a saviour in Jesus but his own people try to kill him, and so it continues throughout history with persecution after persecution, and it doesn't fully finish until Revelation 21 when the enemy will be destroyed forever. The rest of human life follows this pattern.

But for Pharaoh that's not it over with. Because our reading says in verse 12 that the more the Israelites are oppressed, the more that God multiplies and spreads them. Pharaoh goes to the next step.

Verse 15, Pharaoh brings together the midwives and tells them that when they are helping the Hebrew mothers deliver their children that if they give birth to a boy they are to kill them. You see if God is able to multiply and bless his people, then Pharaoh's counter-action is to kill the next generation of men so they can't produce another generation.

But again, this plan backfired, because Pharaoh's 2 midwives were clear about who they obeyed and who they didn't. They didn't do what the King of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live. Now there's some debate as to whether they did the right thing in lying to Pharaoh – was it right to lie. Is it ever right to lie? That's for another sermon?

But what we do know is that these two ladies should have been terrified for not following Pharaoh's instructions, and yet their faith and willingness to obey the Lord was of much greater importance than disobeying him. They placed themselves at risk in order to remain faithful to God. And we read in verse 20 that God responded by multiplying the people further including also the midwives' own families. So once again, Pharaoh loses.

I wonder for us today, how far are we willing to go in your obedience of God's standards. Would we be willing when we as a nation are being instructed to do something that is against God's plans, would we be willing to stand up against government for the sake of the Lord. I would hope so. But we all know we have it relatively easy in our society when it comes to being a Christian. Think for a moment about our brothers & sisters in other parts of the world who are being locked up just for declaring their love of the Lord even though it's against the law. I hope it helps us appreciate our freedom of worship today.

So the Hebrews not only faced harsh conditions, they were now threatened with the death of their baby boys, and yet Pharaoh was not finished. Knowing that he could no longer rely upon the Hebrew midwives to bring about pain on the people, he now had to rely on his own people – the Egyptians, to throw any boys that were born into the Nile. And who would have thought that God's tactics would be so incredibly future proofed, by not only saving a Hebrew boy, but that he would be adopted by none other than Pharaoh's daughter! And we know the rest of the story, as Moses would go on to bring about freedom for God's captive people.

Folks today if you are not a Christian, and by that I mean that you haven't yet come to Christ and sought repentance for your sinful life, then the idea of spiritual attack coming your way may not seem very appealing really. You might be thinking, Jonny this life is tough enough already, and you're telling me that when you submit fully to God's will for my life, things will actually become more difficult, well then no thanks. But folks, God never said that the Christian life would be an easy life. In fact Jesus declared that in this life we would have troubles, but then he went on to say that remember he has overcome the world. The fight

that we have now is worth is. Paul wrote to his brother Timothy saying this *“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. <sup>8</sup> Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness”* (2 Timothy 4:7) For the people of God who were being afflicted by the Egyptians, God continued to provide more blessing, even though they felt the harsh affects of obedience right throughout the exodus in one way or another. But it showed that no matter what the struggle was, God remains faithful to his people.

Here's what the great commentator Matthew Henry wrote – *“Christianity spread most when it was persecuted. The blood of the martyrs was the seed of the Church”*. And if you look at the history of the Church, that is in fact true. If God's people are being persecuted, what happens is that the Gospel spreads and the Church grows. Here's an example, Chairman Mao Zedong didn't like Christianity – he drove out all the missionaries from China, and he thought he had wiped out Christianity from his country, and yet today China is said to have the greatest growth of Christianity anywhere else in the world. Albania had a president called Enver Hoxha who in 1967 turned the country into the world's first atheist state. He closed down all churches and mosques. In one depressing episode, a priest was executed for the crime of performing a baptism in a couple's home. Hoxha even banned beards due to their association with Islam and Orthodox Christianity. And yet today, there is a thriving evangelical church existing in the country now. After being atheistic 50 years ago, 31% of the population are now Christian. You see, when God's people are being persecuted, then the Gospel spreads. So we should not be discouraged when we see God's people suffering for their faith – it demonstrates the faithfulness of God's people today. But it does therefore leave us with a question. As we look at the harsh treatment which the Israelites took from Pharaoh and as we know the story of Moses, we know it goes from bad to worse, why then here in the UK are we not suffering in the same way for the Lord Jesus as our brothers and sisters in other places are? Now it may well be that by God's grace we are not suffering, but could it also be because the Church of Christ here in this country is not being as faithful as it should be and as it ought to be? Are today's Christians actually standing up for their faith?

Like those midwives who were willing to stand up for their faith in front of Pharaoh, have we considered if our testimony of our faith has put us in any danger or risk, and if not, why not? After all, it doesn't seem that at any other time in history, has the Christian faith not been at threat of persecution, so how can we be exempt? Can we be like Peter and John in Acts 4:19 when confronted for speaking of the Gospel and being silenced, were able to say *“Whether it is right in the sight of god to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard”*.

So why does all of this matter? Why should we stand up for the Gospel? Why can't we just leave that with the ministers and pastors that we pay for each Sunday? Well from our reading today we see that the faithful people of God will be blessed – it may not be health and wealth in this life, but it will be the blessings of eternal life with Jesus. What could be better than that but to be with Jesus. That's what God gives to those of us who are faithful.

Now, if all of this spiritual warfare scares you, then I would encourage you to jump right over to the story of what happens on Easter Sunday, that day of resurrection. And also take time to read Revelation 21 and 22... See how the story ends! And be greatly encouraged to continue the battle! No greater reward awaits those who stand firm for the gospel no matter the cost in this life.