

INTRODUCTION

As a pastor, part of my ministries is to visit families. Some people have bigger houses, and others have smaller ones. The way people decorate their home reflects their taste – color, furniture and how they arrange everything. Without exception, there will be some items with memorable values. There may be souvenirs people bought from the places they traveled to. Many people also like to hang pictures that capture important moments on the walls. They can talk on and on about their family history. I am a simple person, and so I prefer not to clutter my house with a lot of things. But if you come into my office, you will see my ordination certificate sitting by the window. I was ordained as a pastor ten years ago. The five pastors who examined me at that time signed my certificate. One of them went to be with the Lord, and another one had retired. When I prepared the certificate, I asked one of the five pastors what to write on it. He suggested that among other things, the most important wordings are that I am a “Minister of the Word of God.” He explained that no matter what I do in the church, I have to use the Bible as the foundation. That sheet of paper reminds me what God has called me to do. I am not sharing my personal opinion every Sunday, or when I counsel people. I am a servant of God’s Word. Only His Word carries authority to change people’s hearts. God calls you to different roles in and outside of our church. You too have to seek the Bible as your ultimate guide. In Numbers 17, God used a miracle to demonstrate how He enabled the person He had chosen. This account is a continuation of what had happened a chapter ago. Some people wanted to seize authority. God then disciplined them. He reiterated that only Aaron and his descendants could serve as priests. Now God wanted to settle the argument once and for all. Let us learn from this passage that God enables the servants He has chosen to serve Him.

EXPLANATION

1. 測試 Test

God asked Moses to run a test to affirm whom He had chosen. The leaders of each of the 12 tribes of Israel would turn in their staffs. Aaron would be the representative for the tribe of Levi. Therefore, there were actually thirteen leaders in the passage. In the book of Numbers, the descendants of Joseph were counted as two tribes. We can see an example in [1:10](#) - From the sons of Joseph: from Ephraim, Elishama son of Ammihud; from Manasseh, Gamaliel son of Pedahzur. In Genesis chapter 48, Ephraim and Manasseh were adopted by Joseph’s father, Jacob, at his old age. Therefore, the two grandsons became sons. Later, when the Israelites divided Canaan, descendants of the two adopted sons received their own shares of land. We said before that the tribe of Levi would not be counted in the census. God assigned the Levites to serve in the sanctuary rather than to fight in battles. Therefore, the Levites can be considered as the thirteenth tribe. Coming back to chapter 17. We see further instructions about the test in [verses 4-5](#): [4](#) “Place them in the Tent of Meeting in front of the Testimony, where I meet with you. [5](#) The staff belonging to the man I choose will sprout, and I will rid myself of this constant grumbling against you by the Israelites.” Moses would put all the staffs in front of the Testimony. This “Testimony” can be referred to the two tablets on which the Ten Commandments were written,

or the Ark of the Covenant. But since the tablets were stored in the Ark anyway, it does not make any big difference. The point was that all the staffs would be placed close to the Ark, which symbolized God's presence. God told Moses that the staff that belonged to the person whom He had chosen would sprout. The purpose was to cease any future ambition for priesthood. Of course, the Israelites still grumbled down the road. But no one dared to aspire to become a priest again. We may wonder why God asked the leaders to turn in their staffs but not another item. Back in those days, people did not have many personal belongings, not to mention that the Israelites used to be slaves in Egypt. A staff was used as a cane when people treaded on rough terrains. It also served as a weapon to fight off wild animals. People carried their rods everywhere. Nowadays, some men show off their cars or ladies with diamond rings. Many years ago, there was a credit card commercial. The slogan was: "Do you know who I am?" Even when you cannot recognize a celebrity, you can know that he/she is someone important by showing a credit card. Back then, it was not easy to apply for credit unless you had a certain level of wealth. For an Israelites, his rod represented him. It was common for people to carved special markings on their staffs for easier identification. It was an important item to the person. We see an example in [Genesis 38](#). Judah went to a place and looked for a "one-night girl-friend." The lady he talked to was actually his daughter-in-law. There was a story behind the scene, which I do not plan to elaborate now. Judah was willing to give her a young goat for the transaction. Since Judah was on the road, he did not carry any animal with him. The girl asked for a pledge in [verse 18](#): ... "Your seal and its cord, and the staff in your hand." ... Later Judah returned to claim those items because they were important possessions to him.

Next, we will look at the result of the test. It did not take long for God to work His wonder. Read [verse 8](#): The next day Moses entered the Tent of the Testimony and saw that Aaron's staff, which represented the house of Levi, had not only sprouted but had budded, blossomed and produced almonds. Results appeared the very next day! Aaron's staff bore fruit. It was truly a miracle. The proof was clear. If it was only a tiny bud then people might argue that it was just a defect on the stick. God hastened a natural process in an unnatural condition to achieve the result. Normally, it will take a healthy tree at least one season to bear fruit. But God revived a piece of dead wood overnight. This is a common way for God's work in the Bible. For example, He caused the wind in the wilderness to change direction to gather some quails for the Israelites as food. Those birds were in the area. God just concentrated them for His people to catch them. When Moses showed everyone Aaron's staff, no one had any doubt that God had chosen Aaron as a priest.

2. 見證 Testimony

After the test, God told Moses to preserve Aaron's staff. The sprouted rod would serve as a testimony. First, it testified people's sin. We see an immediate reaction from the people. Look at [verses 12-13](#): 12 The Israelites said to Moses, "We will die! We are lost, we are all lost! 13 Anyone who even comes near the tabernacle of the Lord will die. Are we all going to die?" When they witnessed God's power they were reminded of their guilt. They knew that it was not a fun thing to challenge God's authority. God judged the sinners in previous miracles. The ground opened up and swallowed Korah, the Ruben leaders and their families. Then there was fire from God to consume the 250 followers. Many people also died in a plague. Now the people at the scene were afraid that God would discipline them too. By God's grace, no one was judged. Besides convicting people of their sin, God also wanted to use Aaron's staff as a constant

reminder. Read **verse 10**: ... “Put back Aaron’s staff in front of the Testimony, to be kept as a sign to the rebellious. This will put an end to their grumbling against me, so that they will not die.” The other 12 staffs were returned to the original owners. But Aaron’s staff would stay. People would stop complaining about who should be priests when they thought of the rod. Therefore, the staff was more of a negative, than a positive reminder. The same is true when the Israelites gave names to the locations where they tested God. In Exodus chapter 17, people grumbled when they had no water. God asked Moses to strike a rock to let water flow out to quench people’s thirst. The place was later named Massah (meaning testing) and Meribah (meaning quarreling). In Numbers 11, the Israelites craved for meat. God sent many quails, but He later used a plague to discipline His people. The place was called Kibroth Hataavah, meaning “the graves of craving.” In the future, the parents and grandparents would recall the history behind those strange names to their young ones. But notice that Aaron’s staff was not stored in a museum where people could see it every day. It remained in the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark was placed in the Most Holy Place, where only the High Priest was allowed to enter once a year on The Day of Atonement. Therefore, the rest of the people could not see the rod. The object served as a mental reminder. **Hebrews 9:4** tells us that there were two more objects in the Ark: ... This ark contained the gold jar of manna, Aaron’s staff that had budded, and the stone tablets of the covenant. All three items testify against the rebellious Israelites. God dropped manna from the sky as food for His people after they left Egypt. Some people hoarded extra manna because they were greedy and did not have faith in God. God told Moses to save some manna in a jar and put it in the Ark. The food was both a testimony of God’s provision and people’s lack of faith. The two stone tablets had the Ten Commandments written on them. They were the foundation of God’s covenant with His people. But those tablets were actually a replacement set. When Moses went up mount Sinai to receive the Law, Aaron carved a golden calf and enticed people into idol worship. Moses was furious and he shattered the original tablets. All three items testified God’s faithfulness but at the same time men’s sinfulness. Because of the latter reason, perhaps it may be better to hide them inside the Ark. The evidences brought people shame. It is like no student will love to post a report card that is full of F. No employee will volunteer to show his performance record if he is dead last among the colleagues.

CONCLUSION

Having studied the story, we now ask how the lessons relate to us. Before we do that, we have to explore a little more about Aaron’s staff. We said earlier that a rod represented its owner in the ancient world. With God’s power, a dead branch was able to sprout, bloom and produce fruit. God demonstrated that it was by His power that He enabled the servants He had chosen to serve Him. You may have an education degree, many talents and some life experience. But all that added up is just like a dry stick. Without God’s presence with us, we are only a walking cane. The same was true for Moses and Aaron. Actually, years ago God had showed His power through Aaron’s rod. Read **Exodus 7:10** - So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did just as the Lord commanded. Aaron threw his staff down in front of Pharaoh and his officials, and it became a snake. Whose rod was it? It was Aaron’s. He performed the same miracle that Moses did when God called Moses to be a leader. They went together to ask Pharaoh to let the Israelites leave Egypt. Most of you should recall the subsequent stories. Pharaoh did not budge. God thus sent the Ten Plagues. Pay attention to how some of the plagues took place. Look at **Exodus 7:19** - The Lord said to Moses, “Tell Aaron, ‘Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the

waters of Egypt - over the streams and canals, over the ponds and all the reservoirs - and they will turn to blood.' ...” It was Aaron, not Moses, who performed the miracle. God also ordered Aaron to initiate the next two plagues. Skip down to [Exodus 8:5](#) - Then the Lord said to Moses, “Tell Aaron, ‘Stretch out your hand with your staff over the streams and canals and ponds, and make frogs come up on the land of Egypt.’” Next, we will look at [Exodus 8:16](#) - Then the Lord said to Moses, “Tell Aaron, ‘Stretch out your staff and strike the dust of the ground,’ and throughout the land of Egypt the dust will become gnats.” However, Aaron was no longer involved in subsequent miracles. The whole point is that God used the rods of both brothers to accomplish His plans. When they surrendered their staffs to God, then God would administer His power. Moses and Aaron by themselves were only humans. It was God who empowered them to be great leaders. God repeated the same message to the Israelites in our main story today. Aaron’s staff bore fruit when God infused new life to a dry tree branch. God chose Aaron to be a priest and allowed the man to come close to Him. God will equip those He appoints as His servants. Jesus told His disciples the same truth in John 15. Many of you are familiar with [John 15:5](#) – “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” The disciples could only be effective when they were connected to God. As the fall season is getting near, many of you are gradually harvesting vegetable from your garden. It is a joyful experience to pluck off melons, beans or whatever from the plants. Those fruits affirm that your hard work in the previous months is not in vain. Those plants can produce crops because the branches are drawing nutrients from the stem. The same is true in the spiritual realm. We can only bear fruit when we are connected to our Lord. Jesus continued to say in [verse 8](#): “This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.” To receive salvation is the greatest blessing a person can have in this life. But that is only the beginning of God’s blessings. He wants us to bear fruit for Him, and in doing so, He will receive all the glory. Let us skip down to [verse 16](#): “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last...” We do not choose to believe in Jesus. But Jesus chooses us. Also, it is out of His perfect will to assign us different roles in the society and in the church to bear fruit for Him. You may feel like a dead tree branch that has nothing to offer. But when your life is connected with God, He can allow you to bear fruit. What kind of fruit did Jesus refer to? In general, it is the effects of how you show that you are a Christian. Of course, leading people to Christ is one type of fruit. Non-believers would not go out to preach the gospel. Fruits can also be the display of godly characters. People will be surprised when they see you remain calm when falsely-accused. It is not because you are weak. But it is because God’s peace is in you. Or people notice that you show integrity when others compromise their conscience. Your house may not be the biggest and most beautiful home in the neighborhood. But when people see that your family is always full of joy and contentment, they may wonder what your secret is. It is not because you have a big paycheck or bank account. It is because you have joy and contentment in the Lord. It goes without saying that we should rely on God when we serve in the church. If you do so by your own strength and human wisdom eventually you may feel burdensome and even burnt out! You grumble why you are doing things all by yourself as if it was your second job. Week after week, you may be repeating the same things. There is no fresh idea. You feel like a dry firewood! You need to enter the Most Holy Place and stay close to the Lord. You need to re-connect with God so that you will continue to receive spiritual nourishment from Him. You can only be effective to bear fruit when you are in the Lord.