

Speak to the Rock

Streams of Refreshing · Numbers 20

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And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, Take the rod, and gather thou the assembly together, thou, and Aaron thy brother, and speak ye unto the rock before their eyes; and it shall give forth his water, and thou shalt bring forth to them water out of the rock; so thou shalt give the congregation and their beasts drink. And Moses took the rod from before the Lord, as He commanded him (Num. 20:7-9).

We find the story of the smitten rock first presented to us in the book of Exodus. It took place before the law was given, and is a fine example of grace -- the grace of God to ungodly, sinful man. The people were in the deepest necessity; they had no water to drink. Day after day their thirst increased. There were no wells at hand. They might make the most diligent search, and put all their energies into exercise, in digging deep in all directions, still it was a barren and thirsty land, wherein was no water. Weak, parched, and prostrate, they had no power whatever of meeting their necessity. They were perishing with thirst, and had no water to drink. But more than this. They were sinners -- they murmured; they tempted God, and were ready to stone His servant. Thus they were unworthy as well as needy. God might justly have allowed them to perish, for they merited His wrath and displeasure; but He took occasion to deal in grace instead of judgment. His pitying eye beheld their need; His loving heart compassionated them; His infinite wisdom and mercy devised a way of deliverance; and His almighty arm speedily carried it out. The question was, Could God, would God, give this thirsty, sinful, perishing people water to drink? Yes, He could and would do so, consistently with His own holy attributes, and that too in a way that should be to the praise of His glory. By smiting another instead of them, His justice would be satisfied, and His mercy freely flow. This is the way of grace to sinful, helpless man in the cross of Christ, and was shewn forth in the type of the smitten rock. The Lord said unto Moses, Behold, I will stand before thee there upon the rock in Horeb; and thou shalt SMITE THE ROCK, and there shall come water out of it, that the people may drink. And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel {Ex. 17:6}.

Thus, in the way of grace, the needy sinful people had an abundant supply of water to satisfy their thirst. I say, this is a fine example of grace, and is important, because we are told in the New Testament that we are saved by grace: By grace are ye saved, through faith {Eph. 2:8};

but perhaps few things are so little understood as grace. It is said by some that grace means that God will do His part, if we will do ours; but this entirely destroys the thought of grace. Others say, that it means unmerited love; but it means more than this, for it brings favour and blessing to those who only deserve punishment and destruction; it brings eternal life and glory to such as have merited eternal death and banishment; and flows freely to us through the smitten Son of God, who was wounded for

our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities. It is the death of Christ, then, that is here typified by the smitten rock. There the

stripes that we deserved were laid upon Him, and thence the water of life flows freely. "From all His wounds new blessings flow, A sea of joy without a shore."

Grace, then, is only for sinners; it springs from God, is manifested in the death of Christ, and satisfies the thirsty souls of those who there taste and see that the Lord is good; and as it was only water from the smitten rock that quenched the thirst of the perishing Israelites, so it is only the blood of the cross that gives peace to a sin-sick soul. For a thirsty, perishing Israelite to have turned his back upon the waters gushing out so abundantly from the smitten rock, instead of drinking thereof, would be judged to be the height of madness; how much more so is it now to turn away from the crucified Son of God, who died to save sinners! Having said thus much on the smiting of the rock, let us now turn more immediately to the subject before us; and first, we may notice that, after the people of Israel had drank the water from the rock, they lived, and fought the battles of the Lord; but after a while, though the rock never left them, they thirsted again, as we find in this chapter. This is a remarkable type, and serves to show us that, after we have received the Lord Jesus, after we have obtained life and peace through faith in His name, after we may have fought the battles of the Lord, after we may have drank for months and years the water of life, and enjoyed the presence of the Lord, yet we shall feel barren and thirsty, if we cease to live upon Christ; if we turn from Him, and lose the taste and comfort of His love. In pursuing our meditation, we might remark -1. On the state of the believer when not living upon Christ; 2. On failure in the service of God; 3. Consider what is the Christian's true path; and 4. Glance at the blessings connected with it. 1. THE STATE OF THE BELIEVER WHEN NOT LIVING UPON CHRIST. So long as we abide in the Lord Jesus, dwell on His love, live in His presence, sit at His feet, rest on His promises, feed on His word, love His ways, pour out our hearts to Him, and draw out of His fulness, our peace flows as a river; we overcome in conflict, escape out of temptation, bear our sufferings with fortitude, fight the good fight of faith, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. But when the eye and heart forget Christ, when we turn from Him as the smitten Rock, the fountain of life and love, then the barrenness and sorrows of the wilderness press heavily upon us, and disappointment, rebellion, murmuring, and other bitter fruits of unbelief easily manifest themselves. Perhaps no people act more

foolishly, are more miserable, or more exhibit the unlovely tempers and evils of the flesh, than those believers who forget the Lord Jesus, and draw not refreshment and blessing out of His fulness. The enemy, finding such off their guard, easily overcomes them with his fiery darts, acts upon the pride and lusts of the flesh, until, instead of the triumphant song of Worthy is the Lamb {Rev. 5:12},

their lips give utterance to desponding and complaining exclamations. It has been said by another, that "the blood of Christ both strengthens our inner man, and keeps down the weeds of the flesh." And so it is; for, in the exercise of faith, we draw from Christ, and are so spiritually strengthened, that we are able to keep under carnal lusts. But, though we be true disciples of Christ, severed from Him we grow weak spiritually, and fleshly desires and ways spring up, and are sometimes painfully manifested.

Accordingly, this chapter shows us, that when the people had no water from the rock, and thirsted, that they gathered themselves together against the servants of God; that they chode with Moses, complained of the barrenness of the wilderness, and concluded that they would die, and never see the land of promise. Their experience was that of darkness, barrenness, and misery, because they got away from the only fountain of refreshment and blessing. And so it is with God's people now. Oh, how many complaining children of God may trace their present sadness of soul, not, as they suppose, to the circumstances that have crossed their path, but to the two evils of forsaking the fountain of living waters, and hewing out to themselves broken cisterns that can hold no water! How can we be happy apart from Him who is our life and salvation? How can we be making melody in our hearts, so long as the spring of all our joys ceases to be viewed by us as the river of life to our souls? Those who cleave to the Lord Jesus, and walk in His ways, may assuredly count upon the comfort of the Holy Ghost as their portion; and while they will not be without the trials of the wilderness, they will realize the present help and mercy of God in trouble, and in God's own good time deliverance from trouble. Thus abiding in the Lord Jesus, we shall be happy and fruitful, but severed from Him we shall be barren and unhappy; and, as the apostle Peter saith, such will be blind, unable to see afar off, and will forget that they were purged from their old sins. How important, then, that the Christian should not feed on ashes, or seek in any measure satisfaction at the worldling's swine-trough; but, knowing that Christ is all, live upon Christ -His person, work, fitness, fulness, and offices; hide, as it were, in His wounds, drink deeply into His gracious words and ways, treasure up His promises, eat His flesh, dwell on His unutterable and unchanging love, seek more and more His unsearchable riches; so that the constant language of our souls may be, His mouth is most sweet, yea, He is altogether lovely. This is my Beloved, and this is my Friend {S of S 5:16}.

2. FAILURE IN SERVICE is also recorded in this affecting narrative. Moses desired to serve the Lord, and to serve His people; but he did not do so in God's way; instead, therefore, of its being acceptable service, it was so displeasing to the Lord, that he was

not allowed to go into the land on account of it. It was zeal, but not according to knowledge. God told Moses to take the rod, but did not tell him to use it as he did. He was also told to speak to the rock, but instead of that he smote it. God used no rebuke in speaking to His servant about the assembly, but Moses called them rebels {Num. 20:10}.

All these things show that Moses was not serving in the temper and spirit of the Lord. To seek to satisfy God's thirsty people was well, but he did not act in it for the glory of God. And it is important to notice that, notwithstanding Moses' failure, God acted then, as He often does now -- He brought blessing to the people, though He chastened His servant for his inconsistent conduct. The failure was very great, not only in its not being obedience to the Lord's plain command, but in spoiling the type, which was, doubtless, intended to teach us that the rock once smitten, need never be smitten again, but would give forth refreshing streams at the cry of faith, as we now know Christ. The rod here was evidently not the rod of Moses, wherewith he smote the rock; that rod Moses took with him on the top of the hill, after the rock in Horeb was smitten, and we never hear of it afterwards. Moses' rod there did

its work, and the type teaches us that the law had its claims met in the wounds, bruises, and death of the Son of God. The rod ordered to be taken in this scene at Meribah was the rod which was before the Lord (Num. 20:9), which was Aaron's rod (see Num. 17:1-5), and teaches us not about smiting, but about the resurrection and priesthood of Christ. We are told that this dead rod budded, and brought forth buds, and bloomed blossoms, and yielded almonds {Num. 17:8}.

And was laid up before the testimony and the Lord said, Thou shalt quite take away their murmurings from me, that they die not {Num. 17:10}.

Thus we see shadowed forth the resurrection and priesthood of Christ. It can, therefore, easily be seen how consistent with the truth it would be for Moses to hold forth this beautiful rod beside the rock gushing with his waters at his word, and how contrary to the typical meaning it was to smite the rock, especially with such a rod. How blessed now to know Jesus in resurrection-glory as the Rock once smitten to save His people from death, but now before the Lord; and that we have only to contemplate Him to be filled with adoring gratitude, only to speak to Him, and His blessings flow with abundant refreshment. How much religious service in the present day, we fear, is not acceptable to God! How much there may be that God's eye detects as being chiefly the busy energy of the flesh, and not spiritual -- not in the obedience of faith -- not in accordance with the truth of God! How important that we should not only be addicting ourselves to the Lord's work, but that we should carry it out in God's way, and for His glory! But this leads us to consider -3. THE CHRISTIAN'S TRUE PATH. Declension of soul, and failure in service, generally go together, as we see in Peter, who first followed the Lord afar off {Luke 22:54},

and in mistaken zeal, cut off the servant's ear {see John 18:10}.

The Christian's true path is communion with God, and obedience to His word; and the backsliding and failing Christian must return thence, if he would be happy, and glorify God. The believer's calling is unto fellowship with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ {see 1 John 1:3};

to walk with God, to realize that all his springs are in Him, and to wait for His Son from heaven. Christ, the true Rock that was smitten, is his all-satisfying portion. He has to do with the Lord Jesus who was crucified, who said, It is finished {John 19:30}!

and bowed His head, and gave up the Ghost. He knows that that one finished work of eternal redemption is perfect, and that by it He hath perfected for ever all those who truly believe in Him; so that there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins. He, therefore, looks to Jesus risen and glorified, the slain Lamb on the right hand of God, as the One who has all power in heaven and in earth. His business, then, in every need is to speak to the Rock {see Num. 20:8},

and to prove that living water continually flows from Him. The Christian has generally much joy at first, because his thirst is satisfied by simply drinking of the waters of the smitten rock, and Christ is all to him. He knows little of the deceitfulness of his own heart, the trials of the wilderness, or of the seductions of Satan. After a while, however, when unexpected difficulties and necessities cross his path, he perhaps unconsciously loses sight of Christ, by being taken up with the sorrowful

circumstances, and thirsts for refreshment and comfort. But where will he find it? Surely he will find it flow only from that same Rock which at first quenched his thirst, the Lamb who is now in the midst of the throne. This, then, is the Christian's true course: looking unto Jesus, abiding in Jesus, drawing from Jesus, learning of Jesus, whose ways are ways of pleasantness, and all His paths are peace; or as the apostle expresses it, Be careful for nothing, but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God {Phil. 4:6}.

Speak to the Rock; every need should lead us to the fulness of the Lord Jesus; every temptation to His sympathy and power; every occasion of blessing with thanksgiving to Him; every sorrow should lead us to contemplate the sorrows of Jesus; every act of service should be done in dependence on the Lord Jesus; yea, concerning everything we should speak to Him. Those who thus set the Lord always before them will experience that He is at their right hand, and that they cannot be moved. "Happy they who trust in Jesus; Sweet their portion is, and sure."

Oh, ye dear children of God! are you cast down by reason of the trials of the way? Are you oppressed, and fainting under a sense of your many needs, many sorrows, many achings of heart?

Oh, speak to the Rock! Go and tell the Lord Jesus all your sorrows, and all your perplexities; yea, tell Him all -- pour out your heart before Him. He will refresh your spirit, lift up your hands that hang down, sustain your confidence, give you wisdom, and show you that He careth for you. He bids you trust in Him at all times -- not some times, but all times -- therefore speak to Him this time. You may have proved it a blessed thing to speak to Him in times past: oh, speak to Him now! Cast all your care on Him, for He says, He careth for you. Cast every burden upon the Lord, and He will sustain you. You need not fear any sorrow, if it only lead you to the Lord Jesus; and every felt need will be a blessing, if it only be a fresh errand to the mercy-seat. Fellow-Christians! the Rock still gives forth His water, and refreshing streams still flow freely to us from our Lord Jesus. It is vain to look elsewhere. Princes cannot help us. Creatures are broken cisterns; and it is written, Woe to them that go down to Egypt for help {Isa. 31:1}!

and, Cursed be the man that trusteth in man, and maketh flesh his arm {Jer. 17:5}.

Without Christ we can do nothing; but there is no uncertainty in calling upon the Lord Jesus. Speak to the Rock, and it shall give forth His waters {see Num. 20:8}.

Such is the way of blessing; for it is written, Blessed are all they that put their trust in Him {Psa. 2:12}. Blessed is the man that heareth me, watching daily at my gates, waiting at the posts of my doors {Prov. 8:34}.

In this way only will true Christians be happy, and thus be fitted for the Lord's work; for the joy of the Lord is your strength {Neh. 8:10}.

It is only by the written word, unfolded to us by the Spirit, that we know how to serve God acceptably. If a man love me, he will keep my words {John 14:23},

said Jesus. It seemed a little thing when God said, Speak to the rock,

that Moses should smite it; but it dishonored God. God's word is to be heeded by us, and obeyed; and drinking of the water from the rock and honoring His word, we shall render acceptable service. The importance of simply obeying God's word is again taught us in 1 Sam. 15, God commanded Saul to slay all the Amalekites, but Saul only slew some. This was disobedience; and God told him, that to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams {1 Sam. 15:22}.

We see another example in the days of David. God had ordered that none were to carry the ark of God but the Levites; but David ordered it otherwise. The consequence was, that disappointment, chastisement, and failure, accompanied the service (see 1 Chron. 13:10); but afterwards, when the king acted according to the word of the Lord, and rendered acceptable service, it was connected with the Lord's blessing, and the people's joy and

gladness. How important, then, that we should beware of the traditions of men, and heed and obey the written word of God! 4. Let us now glance at THE BLESSINGS CONNECTED WITH DRINKING OF THE WATER FROM THE ROCK. The people's thirst was quenched, their murmurings ceased, their spirits were refreshed, and their hearts were cheered. But the sequel shows us two things more: first, that they acted graciously; and secondly, they fought against the enemies of the Lord valiantly. In reference to the first point, we are told that they sent kind messages to the king of Edom, and when the Edomites repeatedly refused to let Israel pass through their land on any terms, they went another way. This was carrying out the mind of God, for Edom was Israel's brother after the flesh; and it reminds us of the fact, that those who taste and enjoy most of the grace of God will be kind, yielding, and gracious to others. Who would have thought, a short time before, that those rebellious Israelites would be so soon seen acting in such a gracious temper; but they had drank of the water from the rock -- they had seen and believed the goodness of the Lord, and this had made the difference. With regard to the second point, when the Canaanites attacked them, and took some of their brethren prisoners, they went forth in the strength of the Lord, and fought valiantly and successfully against the enemy, and utterly destroyed both them and their cities. They fought for their fallen brethren, and against the enemies of the Lord. Is it possible that these very people were so recently chiding with Moses, and setting themselves against him and Aaron? Yes; but they had drank of the water from the rock; they had been restored in their minds to a consciousness that God was for them, and not against them, and this had made the difference. Do not such considerations so endear the cross of Christ to our souls, that we cheerfully sing -- "The more, through grace, ourselves we know, The more rejoiced are we to bow In faith beneath Thy cross; To trust in Thine atoning blood, And look to Thee for every good, And count all else but loss."

Soon, beloved, the Lord Jesus will come again, and our pilgrimage days will have for ever passed away; we shall then no longer know the sorrows and drought of a barren wilderness. Now it is our highest privilege to

-- to hold intercourse by faith with our blessed Lord Jesus, whom having not seen we love; then we shall see Him face to face, and admiring His eternal beauties and excellencies with unmingled and unchanging joy and gratitude, we shall be FOR EVER WITH THE LORD.