

Water for the Thirsty

Last week we looked in Exodus 16 at God's provision of manna, bread from heaven, in gracious response to the grumbling of his people. Today we come to the third instance of the complaining of the Israelites, which was once again occasioned by their thirst (15:22-26). This time we see God's provision of his water for the thirsty. Reading from Exodus 17:1-7:

"From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ² The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?" ³ But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" ⁴ So Moses cried out to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." ⁵ The LORD said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. ⁶ I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷ He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

In the destruction we have seen by hurricanes and earthquakes, we note what a precious, absolutely necessary is clean drinking water for so many desperate people. The Lord was leading his people toward the Promised Land, and in that barren land, water was a precious commodity. And for the Israelites, the need for water was a matter of life and death. Once again we note that the Lord was testing his people, to see if they had the faith to trust in his provision.

When we enter a faith relationship with God through Christ we become pilgrims, partakers of resurrection life, which means we are participants with Christ in taking the way of the cross as we journey toward the Promised Land. Along the way God tests us to strengthen our relationship with him, to wean us from the fallen world, and to draw us closer to his grace. The wilderness is designed to teach us to depend on God for his provision and remind us that this fallen world is not our home. God's testing comes through life's trials, temptations and difficulties, and he gives the grace to enable us to trust and find our strength and character-building through him. The wilderness where he leads us is not unbearable; he will not test us beyond what we can bear (1 Corinthians 10:13).

But instead of trusting that God would provide this need, as he had done remarkably before, we see God's people *quarreling and grumbling*. Realizing there was no water to drink the people quarreled with Moses. "Quarrel" is stronger than "grumble," which means their unbelief had increased since the last test with the manna. The

Israelites evidenced “unbelievable unbelief” (Ryken), and Moses closed this sad chapter by naming the place “Massah” (testing) and “Meribah” (quarreling), saying that the people tested the Lord, saying “Is the Lord among us or not?” (7). This unbelief of God’s people was so strident and hostile that Moses was afraid they were about to stone him (4).

We live in an age when many not only don’t fear God but lash out in anger against him and his people, particularly his leaders. God’s purpose was to test his people in order to strengthen their faith, but the people turned against the Lord and his representative and tested him. God invites our testing him when based on faith, with the purpose of proving his promises to be true, “but he abhors a test based on doubt (i.e., ‘I don’t believe, and think God should prove himself to me,’ as in John 6:30). The test based on doubt makes us the judge and God the defendant” (Oswalt).

I might add that today’s unbelieving pagan secularist is not always a “kindly judge,” but often an angry one, demanding an explanation from God for his apparent mismanagement of the planet. And this is true of the so-called Christian believer as well as the pagan. We’re more focused on what we think of God’s performance than on what he might think of ours, as though we have a right to question him, to put him in the defendant’s box. Instead of focusing in faith on a loving, wise and sovereign God, we’re obsessed with our circumstances and demand an explanation from God, and in the meantime think we have a right to be angry with him.

But we see that, by the mercy and grace of God, **thirsty people are led to the Rock**. The main truth the Lord was seeking to instill in his people was *his faithful Presence*. The staff that Moses used to part the Sea of Deliverance was used this time to strike the rock which provided life-giving water. This should have spoken to the people to say that the God who delivers through the Sea of salvation is the God who will provide in the long journey of obedience in the wilderness. This is an argument from the greater to the lesser. God’s doing the main thing is assurance he will continue to do the needful things:

“He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” (Romans 8:32).

Not only had God led the Israelites through the Sea; he had healed the waters of Marah (15:22-26) and given them quail and the 40-year provision of manna (16:1-36). All of these provisions were intended to convince the Israelites of God’s faithful presence with them. When God is with his people, he meets our every need. And God calls us to a relationship with him that makes us resurrection people who live in the reality of the everlasting Kingdom of God. The thirst of the Israelites was real, but the Presence was “infinitely more real” (Durham).

How fundamental to our faith, that we realize and live in the reality of the Presence, of a sovereign, faithful, wise and loving God who’s with us! He cares about our

every need, and even when we find ourselves in the wilderness of difficult circumstances we can be assured that nothing ever takes him by surprise.

Of course we know that God could have created an underground spring “on the spot,” but it’s also nice to think that from the beginning of creation God had the Israelites in mind and when the rivers and underground aquifers were forming, he made sure there would be one where he would lead his people by the cloud and pillar of fire, and example of God’s “anticipatory providences” (Motyer).

The faithful Presence who began your salvation will bring it to completion (Philippians 1:6), and along the journey of your life toward the Promised Land you can be sure that nothing will take him by surprise and that he’s working everything together for your spiritual and eternal good (Romans 8:28f). He knows your present need and he has been at work ahead of you to meet your present and future needs and to guide you in his perfect way.

Instead of quarreling and murmuring, the people should have been trusting in the faithful Presence and looking to *the stricken Rock*. The rock, Paul says, was God’s presence with the Israelites in the wilderness (1 Corinthians 10:4), and “rock” is used throughout Scripture to describe the strength, steadfastness and reliability of God (Ryken); especially the Psalms are rich in the imagery of God as our rock of defense and salvation (18:2; 19:14; 27:5; 40:2; 61:2; 62:2; 92:15). The rock in the wilderness represented the presence of the great I Am, Christ himself. Paul perhaps in 1 Corinthians 10:4 followed the tradition of the ancient rabbis who taught that the water-producing rock followed the Israelites throughout their wilderness journey (Kelley). The rock with them in the wilderness was Christ.

When Moses struck the rock with his staff, releasing the flow of water, another image of Christ is portrayed—the stricken Rock. When the soldier pierced the side of the crucified Christ, there was “a sudden flow of blood and water” (John 19:34). This image showed that the stricken Rock, Christ, would supply the flow of the Spirit, the life-giving flow from the crucified, risen Christ.

18th Century Anglican clergyman Augustus Toplady (1740-1778) wrote the well-known hymn, “Rock of Ages,” with this first verse:

*Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in thee;
Let the water and the blood,
From thy riven side which flowed,
Be of sin the double cure,
Cleanse me from its guilt and pow’r.*

And so we see that **thirsty people may drink from the Rock**. When Moses struck the rock, abundant water was *offered freely by grace*. Despite the quarreling, grumbling and unbelief of the Israelites, God gave abundant water and once again

revealed himself to be a God of mercy and grace. All the people needed to do, despite their unbelief and rebellious spirit, was to drink freely. Despite the ways the Lord had delivered and miraculously provided for the Israelites, they had not received because they had not asked (James 4:2). Instead of quarreling and grumbling against Moses they should have done what Moses did—ask God. All thirsty people need to do is pray, to ask God, who gives graciously.

The eternal Son of God, the living Rock, Jesus, greeted the woman at Jacob's well, a woman who had a desperate thirst, one that exceeded her physical need for water, which she came to draw that noonday. Jesus asked her to draw him a drink of water from the well, and the woman was startled that he as a man had even spoken to her, and even more amazed that as a Jew he was asking her, a Samaritan, for a drink. And then Jesus replied,

"If you only knew the gift God has for you and who you are speaking to, you would ask me, and I would give you living water" (John 4:10, *NLT*).

If only this woman knew, and *If only* these Israelites had asked God they would have received water without distress and grumbling. *If only* those of you outside of Christ, who yearn for forgiveness, peace, joy and true satisfaction, would ask of God, he would give you. *If only you knew* the difference Christ would make in your life you would ask him to forgive your sin and give you a new beginning, a new life. Christ, the stricken Rock, has paid the price for our sins upon his cross. He rose from the dead by the power of God and this same resurrection power will change your life now to resurrection life and lead you all the way to the Promised Land of the New Heaven and Earth.

The thirsty woman at the well received and her life was changed, renewed and refreshed, so much in fact that she left her water jug at the well and excitedly ran to the village to tell about her discovery of the water of life that Jesus gave her (John 4:28ff).

At a festival in Jerusalem, with a procession of priests carrying golden pitchers of water to commemorate the water given their ancestors in the desert, Jesus proclaimed in a loud voice:

"If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him."

Jesus offered eternal life through the Spirit, the life-giving and satisfying living water. He addressed the religious, the "church" crowd, as it were. No amount of religious instruction or churchly tradition and upright behavior gives this empowering and satisfying water of life flowing from our hearts. The life of God and his refreshing presence are available only as God's free gift to those, who like the thirsty woman at the well, are willing to receive.

We who are born of the Spirit (John 3:5-8) are “sentenced” to be satisfied only by the Spirit. Nothing else and no one else can ever again bring true satisfaction. We must be filled or we’ll be frustrated. We’re given a “spring of water” (John 4:14) and “streams of living water” that flow from within us (John 7:38). We’re born again and enter into a relationship with Christ that must be maintained and constantly refreshed by living in dependence upon and walking in step with the Spirit. The only way a Spirit-regenerated child of God can have joy, and produce all of the fruit of the Spirit, is by daily being filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18), allowing him to have full control of our mind, will and emotions.

Just like the thirsty Israelites, unless we’re drinking from the fountain, the Rock of Living Water, we’ll be grumblers and quarrelers, condemned to be miserable, dissatisfied believers, living contrary to our new nature. Getting more active in church activities and doing more for God is no solution to this malady. Some of the most miserable people in all the earth are religious church goers and active religious workers who are spiritually empty and dry and have lost the joy of God’s salvation (Psalm 51:12). They have just enough Christianity to be miserable. They can no longer enjoy the pleasures of sin for a brief season (Hebrews 11:25), nor can they enjoy the life in the Spirit, whom they neglect and grieve. Pagans who have never tasted the life in the Spirit are likely to be happier than Christians who know what it was to experience the life and joy of God and a “full tank” of blessing and who now are dry and running on empty.

But Christ, the Rock, the source of Living Water, is not only for our spiritual refreshment and personal pleasure. We desperately need him, just as millions on this earth are in desperate need of physical water. He’s not a luxury; he’s an absolute necessity for life today and through eternity.

All of us, inside and outside of Christ, hear his gracious invitation, from the Spirit and the church:

“Let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift” (Revelation 22:17).