

Living Water

Exodus 17:1–7

All the congregation of the people of Israel moved on from the wilderness of Sin by stages, according to the commandment of the LORD, and camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, “Give us water to drink.” And Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?” But the people thirsted there for water, and the people grumbled against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?” So Moses cried to the LORD, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.” And the LORD said to Moses, “Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel, and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink.” And Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. And he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the quarreling of the people of Israel, and because they tested the LORD by saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?”

Being a Christian isn't always easy. You would think in some ways that it would be more glorious. We are, after all, a royal priesthood, a chosen people. We are sons and daughters of a heavenly King. And yet, when we look at our lives, they seem so very ordinary, full of pains and hardships, the frustrations and failures that are common to everyone. And when we take an honest assessment of our own lives, our own hearts, they so often don't look any holier, any more special, than those of our neighbors. And so it is; life can be pretty discouraging.

We come to our Old Testament Reading, a picture of the children of Israel. After 430 years of slavery in Egypt, God gloriously delivered his people from their bondage, and from the tyranny of Pharaoh. On that dramatic Passover night, they ate a lamb, and with its blood they marked their doors. The angel of death passed over their homes, convincing Pharaoh to let them go. And then, in yet another dramatic act of salvation, God led his Israelites through the waters of the Red Sea, drowning Pharaoh's army, with all its chariots and horses. The Israelites sang joyfully, “I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed

gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea” (Ex 15:1). They were God's people, redeemed and saved from their enemy. And they were on their way to the Promised Land.

What came next for the Israelites? Well, their new life got off to a pretty good start. After the exodus, our Lord led his people to a place called Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees. It was as if the Israelites had reached the Promised Land, as if they were tasting paradise. Not one, but twelve springs of water, for the twelve tribes of Israel. Not a few, but seventy palm trees, to provide shade and food. The numbers point forward to the paradise of heaven. The scene points forward to the city of heaven, through which the river of life runs. It points forward to the tree of life, which grows on either side of the river, with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. Yes, Elim was a preview of the feast to come, a bit of paradise.

It reminds me of what it's like when a child is confirmed into the faith or when a baby is baptized or when a new member is received into the church. Usually, there's a party. Maybe a little cake and punch. And there's a lot of goodwill and hope and even a bit of a spiritual high, a little euphoria that comes with new beginnings.

Perhaps when we think about the Christian life, we can think of it in terms of a marriage. We all know the typical pattern. It so often begins with an exciting courtship, a glorious wedding, and an dreamy honeymoon. But it does not last. It never does. Hardships are sure to follow. The preacher reminds us that marriage is to be “in sickness and in health, for better and for worse,” but we do not really believe him. We think it will be smooth sailing, a continuous high.

It never works that way. Good times are followed by bad, happy times by hardship. And no high can last forever. Time on the mountaintop is followed by a pilgrimage through the valley. The Israelites' first crisis came with hunger. After leaving Elim, they headed out into the desert. After a month or so, things turned sour. They had no food. They were hungry, really hungry. For a lot of us, hunger isn't much of a problem. Many of us could use a little more exercise and a little less food. But the Israelites were hungry and began to long for Egypt, the land of slavery, where at least they had food. And we know the story. How God rained down upon them bread from heaven, and how they ate and were satisfied.

And now, still in the desert, we come to crisis number two. Moving along through the desert, according to the commands of God, they camped at a place called

Rephidim. The problem was, there was no water, and that's a big problem. Bigger than a lack of food. That's why some warn us always to keep bottled water on hand, just in case of emergency. And if you've ever been thirsty, really thirsty, you know how bad it can be. Your mouth dries, your energy sinks, and there's nothing else you can think about. Think about all the mothers, worried for their children. This was a big deal.

Sometimes, we think about the Israelites as grumblers, as ungrateful. And that's true. But they had good reason to wonder, "What is God up to? Why has he delivered us out of Egypt if we're going to go hungry and thirsty? Why has he led us out of the land of death, only to let us die in the wilderness?"

As a Christian, you might feel this way from time to time. If my Lord has done so much to deliver me, to save me from sin, death, and the devil, why has he let me down? Why has he left me suffering? Why, if he is the Lord of bounty, doesn't provide? If he is the source of goodness, shouldn't more of that goodness come my way?

Some TV preachers promise a better life, saying that Christ wants you to live in abundance, with every earthly blessing, right here and now. But that doesn't seem to be the way God deals with his saints, with his people.

It's interesting to see what happens next. The people, thirsty with the kind of thirst most of us have never known, asked Moses, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" (v 3b). So Moses cried out, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me" (v 4b). The Lord then told Moses to take some elders with him and pass before the people. Our Lord added, "Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink" (v 6a). Sure enough, in the sight of the elders, Moses struck the rock, and water came from the rock, and the people drank.

They had wondered, "Is the Lord among us or not?" And the answer was yes. Yes, the Lord was indeed with his people.

What can we learn from all of this? Should we be hard on the Israelites for their hard-heartedness? Well, we could, I suppose. But would we be any different? Is grumbling always bad? I suppose we could say that we are called upon to fear, love, and trust God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and that's true. But trust can't be commanded, and it doesn't develop overnight.

I know couples who adopt children, children who have been abused or neglected. And the story is the same, again

and again. While the parents seek a full embrace, the child often comes around only by stages, learns to love, to trust, by stages, little by little. And it's remarkable when you look at this story: God doesn't chastise his people. In the exodus, they knew the redemption and saving power of the Lord. In the paradise of springs and palm trees at Elim, they learned of a Lord who wanted, ultimately, to bring his people back to a paradise greater than Elim. But, in the meantime, there would be real hunger and thirst. And for that hunger and thirst, the Lord would rain down manna from heaven and bring forth living water from a rock. Yes, our Lord would provide for his people, and in doing so, he would show that he was the one who provided, that he was a Lord in whom they could put all their trust. In the desert, our Lord was building a relationship with his people, and he was patient. He was, as the psalmist says, slow to anger, but abounding in steadfast love.

And what does that mean for us? We would do well to expect hardships, not be surprised when things go bad. So often, it's in the difficulties, in the tough times, that we remember our Lord and that we learn to rely on him. In good times, we so easily become fat and happy, we so easily lose sight that God is the giver of all good things. No food fills our stomach unless it has been given by our God, and no water quenches our thirst unless it comes from our good and gracious Lord.

But even more, these stories point us to a greater hunger and a greater thirst that only God can satisfy. Our Lord says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst." For what? For bread and water? No, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness" (Mt 5:6). Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

Apart from Christ, we are empty, with a hole, not in our stomach but in our heart. And we can fill it with all sorts of things, but we can only be truly satisfied with Christ, who is our bread of life, who is himself the manna that God rains down to us from heaven.

And so our Lord provides for us a living water. It is that same water that he provided to that Samaritan woman, that woman who had been so often divorced. Now there was a woman who was thirsty, thirsty for something that the world could not provide. She tried to fill her life with men, hoping against hope that the next one would make her happy. But it wouldn't work. It couldn't work. Nothing can fill our ultimate longing but *the* Man, Christ himself. St. Paul speaks about the rock in the wilderness, and he says that the rock was Christ himself! He is our source of living water. He is the Lamb slain, from whom comes the

river of life, in which our sins are washed away. He is the well, from which our deepest desires are at last fulfilled.

Like the Israelites, we're in the desert, and we've still got some wandering to do. We should not be surprised to have hot days, hungry days, thirsty days. And maybe, along the way, we will grumble. But bring your grumbling and complaints to the Lord, knowing that he hears your pleas and answers your prayers. Maybe not always as we would like, maybe not as quickly as we'd want. Like the Israelites, we may very well ask, "Is the Lord among us or not?" And the answer is "Yes, He is." And he will never leave us. And with that, we can be satisfied. Amen.

Philip Tesch
March 19, 2017
North Highlands, California