

Sermon File # 656

Scripture Text: Exodus 17:1-7; Scripture Reading: Text & 1 Corinthians 10:1-5

Sermon Title: *Thirsty People and Water from the Rock*

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At International Baptist Church of Brussels, Belgium

On Sunday morning 8 May 2011.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

Sources cited in this manuscript are listed at the end.

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Thirsty People and Water from the Rock

Introduction:

I invite you to open your Bibles with me to today's text, as we continue our study from Exodus, the book of God's deliverance of his people. Last week we looked at God's provision of manna, bread from heaven, in gracious response to the grumbling of his people (16:1-36). 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 a thirsty people and God's provision of water from the rock.

Follow as I read our text, **Exodus 17:17** and then I will read from **1 Corinthians 10:1-6** what the Apostle Paul says about this event in the wilderness.

This is one of the few times since living in Belgium that I thought we might actually need rain, that the ground is too dry and the grass and flowers are beginning to suffer a bit. We're far removed from the wilderness where the Lord was leading his people toward the Promised Land. In that barren land, water was a precious commodity.

The Israelites found themselves in their most desperate plight since the miraculous crossing of the sea (Enns, 339). The need for water was a matter of life and death and not just a need for refreshment from the weariness of travel. Once again we note that the Lord was testing his people, to see if they had the faith to trust in his provision, and even though they failed through their grumbling and complaining spirit, God once again provided their needs.

We have noted how the Triune God is revealed throughout the Old Testament and certainly in the Exodus story of his deliverance of his people, but Paul in 1 Corinthians 10, makes a “remarkable statement” in saying that the rock from which God gave the supply of water was none other than Christ himself, a “christophany” (Kaiser, 407, notes). The physical rock that covered the source of water represented the person of Christ. Paul says also that the water they drank was spiritual drink and that Christ, the rock, continued to accompany the Israelites in the wilderness.

He writes to the spiritually immature Corinthians that this experience in the wilderness was given to them as an example and instruction in trusting and obeying Christ and depending on him as the rock of our salvation and the source of the living water of eternal life and life in the Spirit (1 Corinthians 10:1-12). By implication he warned these worldly-minded Corinthians that, just as most of these Israelites died in the wilderness, short of the Promised Land, so they must be careful lest they fall short of eternal life and blessing (12).

If we agree, as one commentator has said, that we are more like the Israelites than we care to admit (Enns, 342), we also need to heed the example in our text. Let's note first of all...

Thirsty people are unaware of the Rock

Once again we see God's people...

Tested in the desert

As we noted last week, when he tested the Israelites to trust him to provide manna in the wilderness, God's purpose was not to trip his people but rather to teach them and us to trust and to “toughen” us to endure the pilgrimage to the Promised Land (Motyer, 180). The wilderness was hostile territory, but not impossible. It wasn't a completely barren desert like the Sahara, but rather a dry wilderness that wasn't completely bereft of an occasional oasis with water (Reed, 828).

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. As we seek his grace and grow in faith, we are

conformed increasingly to the likeness of Christ Jesus. 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" (Enns, 328), which means their unbelief had increased since the last test with the manna. The Israelites evidenced "unbelievable unbelief" (Ryken, 450), 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), which is an "unbelievable question" (Durham, 231). The unbelief of God's people was so strident and militant 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. As one has noted, 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, *NLT*, 154).

C S Lewis noted that "The ancient man approached God (or even the gods) as the accused person approaches his judge. For the modern man the roles are reversed. He is the judge: God is in the dock. He is quite a kindly judge: if God should have a reasonable defence (sic) for being a god who permits war, poverty & disease, he is ready to listen to it. The trial may even end in God's acquittal. But the important thing is that Man is on the Bench and God is in the Dock" (244).

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, or dock. Instead of focusing in faith on a loving, wise and sovereign God, we are obsessed with our circumstances and demand an explanation from God, and in the meantime think we have a right to be angry with him. And a lot of Christians and church people are taking their anger out on their

church leaders and others who are supposed to make them feel better or at least try to meet their needs and demands.

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...

The 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, which was the key. 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. As one scholar noted, the thirst of the Israelites was real, but the Presence was “infinitely more real” (Durham, 232).

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 is 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. This is what one commentator calls God's “anticipatory providences” (Motyer, 184).

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, who Paul says was Christ's theophany, his presence with them in the wilderness (1 Corinthians 10:4), is used throughout Scripture to describe the strength, steadfastness and reliability of God (Ryken, 455); 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, 83). Paul knew that 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.*

Later, when the Israelites were in the Desert of Zin there was again a water shortage when Moses was commanded this time to just speak to the rock and God would then pour out abundant water for the people and their livestock. But Moses failed to obey and honor God by simply speaking, and instead struck the rock twice with his staff. This sin of disobeying and dishonoring God brought the consequence of Moses' not being allowed to enter the Promised Land (Numbers 20:1-12).

The image here is that the Rock, who was Christ, was stricken only once on the cross, and his sacrifice for our sins never needed to be repeated. Christ died for our sins “once for all” (Romans 6:10; Hebrews 7:27; 9:26-28. See Wiersbe, 105). What Christ, our Rock, did for us on the cross is sufficient for all eternity, and now he is the

everlasting source of eternal life for all who believe in him, who will look to him as the great Rock of ages. 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 (Oswalt, *CBC*, 413). 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 life.

Whatever the past, with all your quarreling with God and others, God is gracious and willing to forgive you completely. Christ, the stricken Rock, has paid the price for your 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.

This gift of God is offered freely to all, and is undeserved and can never be earned. By grace alone are we saved through faith, simple childlike faith alone. It's simply the gift of God. If it were by works, Paul says, we could boast. But it's his life-changing, destiny altering gift of love to us (Ephesians 2:8f).

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 stood and audaciously 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.” And John adds that he was referring to the Holy Spirit, who would be given following Jesus’ passion, resurrection and ascension (John 7:37ff).

Jesus was offering eternal life through the Spirit, the life-giving and satisfying living water. He was addressing 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 a free gift of God to those, who like the thirsty woman at the well, are willing to receive. As an act of faith we receive this gift that’s offered by grace...

Providing strength and satisfaction

The water came out for the people to drink, satisfying their thirst. As we’ll note next week, their thirst was satisfied and they were strengthened just before being attacked by the Amalekites (8). God gives his people living water, the Holy Spirit, to enable us to face the Enemy and to be able to stand firm in the midst of spiritual warfare. The Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Triune Godhead, is our Enabler. The Paraclete is God with us and within us, who stand alongside us to hold us up and to give us strength for the battles of life, just as Aaron and Hur held up the hands of Moses as he interceded for the Israelite army against the Amalekites (12; 1 John 4:4).

Just as the water from the rock prepared the Israelites to face their enemies, so the Living Water of the Spirit received on the Day of Pentecost enabled the church to face ensuing persecution and also to launch their great missionary enterprise. (Meyer, 20-26). As Jesus taught, with faith and the power of the Spirit the church today is able to do even greater things in extent than Jesus did in his earthly ministry (John 14:12f). And conversely, without the full indwelling Spirit of Christ and our dependence on him, we can do nothing of significance and value in the Kingdom (John 15:5).

We who are born of the Spirit (John 3:5-8) are “sentenced” to be satisfied only by the Spirit. Once we have entered the life in the Spirit we must continue to depend on and live in the fullness of the Holy Spirit. Nothing else and no one else can ever again bring true satisfaction. We must be filled or we will be frustrated. We are given a “spring of water” (John 4:14) and “streams of living water” that flow from

within us (John 7:38). We are 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. If we neglect the Spirit by “gratifying the desires of the sinful nature” (Galatians 5:16) and revert to the ways of our pre-conversion nature and behavior, we grieve him, “bring sorrow to God’s Holy Spirit” (Ephesians 4:30). 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 are drinking from the fountain, the Rock of Living Water, we will 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. Such dry and unhappy believers can be the worst of grumblers, complainers and trouble-makers in the church.

Conclusion:

After giving the people water from the rock, Moses named the place of the people’s quarreling and grumbling “Massah,” which means “testing,” and “Meribah,” which means “quarreling” (7). As one pastor/teacher asked, on the map of our lives how many places should be named “Testing and Quarreling” because of the way we have complained and failed to trust and obey the will of God? (Wiersbe, 106).

Paul warned against following the example of these Israelites who died in the desert and forfeited the promised blessings and fell short of the Promised Land (1 Corinthians 10:9). Hebrews also warns against a sinful, unbelieving heart of testing the Lord with our unbelief and spirit of rebellion, which will cause us to “fall in the desert,” failing to reach the promised rest (3:7-19, quoting from Psalm 95:7-11). Resisting and grieving the Spirit and staying dry in the desert is spiritually dangerous, to ourselves and to others.

The Rock of our salvation is with us, and offers us streams of living water. And our prayer should be that of the psalmist:

“As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, O God” (Psalm 42:1).

Those outside of Christ, hear his gracious invitation, from the Spirit and the church:

“Come!’ Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life” (Revelation 22:17).

Like the woman at the well, you can know Christ as the source of Living Water, the refreshing, life-giving flow of the Holy Spirit, giving forgiveness of sin and eternal life.

Those of us who have known Christ and have lost the joy of salvation and must put a name on the place where we are living—“Massah and Meribah, testing and quarreling”—we can repent of our emptiness and unattended thirst and come to the Rock and drink. Jesus promises blessing for those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (Matthew 5:6), “justice” in the *NLT*. We are to thirst for God to fill us with his righteousness but also are to thirst for God’s justice to prevail on earth, as it does in heaven.

If we only knew the joy and satisfaction from water from the Rock we would keep on asking, seeking and knocking until the heavenly Father gives us the greatest gift of all (Luke 11:9-13), the full stream of Living Water!

Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. In what ways was the Lord testing the Israelites in the wilderness? Reflect on and share ways the Lord has tested you in a “wilderness.” What was your response to these tests?
2. One commentator called the Israelites’ quarreling and grumbling an expression of “unbelievable unbelief.” Do you agree with this assessment, and why or why not?
3. Instead of accepting God’s test, the Israelites tested God by demanding proof of his care. In what ways do you think God may allow us to test him and in what ways is our testing God an expression of unbelief?
4. Do you agree with C S Lewis that people today are likely to put “God in the Dock,” i.e. in the place of the accused defendant, and themselves in the position of judge? What evidence do you see for your answer?

5. What do you think God was teaching his people about his presence with them?
6. According to Paul, Christ's presence was expressed by the Rock, which was the source of life-giving water (1 Corinthians 10:4). What comes to your mind with Christ symbolized as our rock?
7. What is the living water Jesus promised in John 4:10 and 7:37-39? How are we to receive this Living Water, and what difference should he make in our lives?
8. Is the Spirit-filled life optional for the follower of Christ? If not, how are we to receive and maintain his fullness in our lives?

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