

Waterless World

In the name of him who is the source of rivers of living water, dear friends in Christ: Last week we began our Lenten journey by joining the Children of Israel in their exodus from Egypt. The tenth and final plague, which involved the death of all Egypt's firstborn, convinced the hard hearted pharaoh that he had been beaten, thus he let Israel go. The Lord led his people out appearing visibly to them in a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. But he wasn't yet finished with the Egyptians. Their powerful army was still a major threat to his people that might enslave them once again. He wanted to destroy it, and destroy it in such a way that all Israel would know the threat was gone. So instead of leading his people on the shortest route to Canaan, their intended goal, he took a detour that led to what appeared to be a dead end at the western shore of the Red Sea. It was a ruse designed to give the pharaoh cause to regret and reconsider his decision to allow his massive slave labor force to simply walk away.

The ruse worked. Before long the dread might of Egypt in full attack mode was charging down on the Israelite encampment. The people panicked. They accused Moses of leading them out of Egypt only to be slaughtered in the desert. Moses urged them to trust the Lord who was fighting for them, and to move forward – forward through the path the Lord opened for them right through waters the Red Sea. With the Lord acting as their rearguard, keeping a safe distance between the Egyptians and his people, Israel spent the entire night crossing over to the far shore. In the morning, when all had made it, the Lord directed Moses to raise his staff and drop an ocean on the pursuing Egyptians. The Israelites watched in amazement as the sea swallowed their enemies. And with all their hearts and voices they praised the Lord who had given them such a wondrous deliverance.

Now they set out once again, the Lord leading the way. They continue south and east through the desert toward Mt. Sinai where the Lord first appeared to Moses in the burning bush. There the Lord will give them his holy Law and make his everlasting covenant with them. But they've got to get there first. And, well, it's slow going. There're over two million of them. There are young children and elderly folks who don't move very fast. They've also got all their baggage and the tents they take shelter in to carry. That slows them down. And they've got herds of livestock. If they manage to make ten miles a day they're doing extremely well.

And the thing about deserts is that they're dry. That's what makes them deserts: little or no water to be had. That's a big problem. Like air, you need water to survive. Four minutes without air, and you're dead. You might make it a day or two without water in the desert. And just a rough estimate is that they consume at least a million gallons of water every day. We can anticipate that they filled their canteens and water barrels from coastal streams flowing into the Red Sea when they were there, but after three day's hike inland with no water to be found that supply is close to being exhausted. People are beginning to worry. They're conserving what little they have left. And that's making them very thirsty.

But wait, what's that up ahead? It's an oasis: a place of water in an otherwise waterless world. Things are looking up. Relief is in sight. They'll be able to resupply soon. No more worries. So certain of it are they that they greedily drink up their remaining water supply.

But upon arrival at the bitter springs of Marah they are shocked and more than a little disappointed to discover that the water there is not fit to drink. Oh, it looks inviting. Seems like

it ought to be helpful. But it's full of alkaline compounds that make it taste awful and actually deadly to drink. A few stalwart souls, refusing to believe that it could be that bad, taste the water anyway. It leaves them gagging and retching, far worse off than before when they were merely thirsty. So, it turns out that that which they hoped would be the source of life conveys death instead – which in turn leads the Israelites to do what they do best: namely complain and accuse Moses of being an incompetent leader.

Moses knows that the situation is grave; and besides, he's thirsty too. He intercedes for the people to the Lord. In response, the Lord shows Moses a particular log, a tree trunk, which when thrown into the pool of Marah miraculously renders the water potable. Israel is saved – at least for the time being.

But as we've seen, the desert is a largely waterless world. It isn't many days later after having moved on from Marah and their subsequent encampment at the oasis of Elim when once again there is a crisis caused by a shortage of water. This time the people do more than complain to Moses. They accuse him of deliberately trying to kill them all and threaten him with violence. Moses, fearing for his life, cries out to the Lord – who once again comes to the rescue. This time he directs Moses to take with him a group of elders and go before the people to the rock of Horeb that stands between the Israelite encampment and Mt. Sinai. The Lord tells him to strike the rock with the staff he used to change the Nile to blood in the first plague. When he does, a gushing stream of water pours forth from the rock. And again, Israel is saved.

What shall we make of these two accounts? On the surface level a couple of things leap out at us. First and most obviously there is the Lord's providence. He gives his people what they need to survive. He always has. He always will. Second there is Israel's stubborn reluctance to trust the Lord. Like at the Red Sea when the pharaoh's army was attacking, the people are far too willing to forget exactly who it is that's on their side whenever there's any hint of trouble or discomfort. And part of what's going on in these episodes is that the Lord is using a bit of hardship now and then to teach the people to learn to trust him. You need something? Don't stand around complaining about it. Ask me. That's what I'm here for. I'll take care of it. These are important lessons for us as well.

But now we want to take it a little deeper. We saw last week that the Red Sea crossing was a picture of Christian Baptism. That's when we pass through the water with Christ and the enemy's power over us is destroyed. So here again we're going to look for a spiritual application in these accounts. Jesus gives us the key in the reading from John's Gospel. **He** is the source of living water in this otherwise waterless world. His Word and Spirit are what we need to survive. And like water, we need it every day. You can't just drink once and forget about it. You need a steady supply. So we need to stay in God's Word so that we continue to receive the Spirit.

Even then, we have to be careful about how we handle the Word. Consider the spring at Marah. The water there is wet, but deadly to drink. What's that about? Well, remember where Israel is going. They're going to Mt. Sinai. There the Lord will give them his holy Law. And make no mistake; his Law is a good thing. It promises life and every blessing to those who keep it. In other words, it looks good. But for sinners, for those who break the Law, it's bitterness and death. It needs something else added: a tree trunk, or what Paul calls the preaching of the cross: Jesus' death for sinners. The Law by itself can only kill; but you add the cross of Jesus, and you get forgiveness, life, and salvation.

This is illustrated again with the rock of Horeb. The Apostle Paul tells us that this rock is Christ. He's the one who stands between us and God's Law handed down at Sinai; handed down to Moses, no less, whose name will become synonymous with the Law. So, when Moses, acting as Mr. Law strikes the rock, that is when Christ dies for sin under the Law's demands, then the water that gives life flows from him.

You may recall that there is a later episode in which Moses is directed by the Lord to get water from a rock. It happens many years later, toward the end of the 40 years that Israel spent in the desert; but there is a significant difference. This time around the Lord tells Moses to simply speak to the rock in order to get the water flowing. He's not supposed to strike it with his staff. The point being that Christ dies just once for sin. After that we have only to proclaim the cross and what Christ accomplished on it for the living waters to flow.

So, proclaim the cross we do for it is a life-giving and sin-cleansing fountain of water in this otherwise waterless world. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!