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SERMON XXI.

THE FLOWING OF THE STREAMS FROM HOREB.

PSALM cv. 41.—“He opened the rock, and the waters gushed out; they ran in the dry places like a river.”

WHEREVER we see mercy, there Christ also may be seen. Indeed, if we loved him as we ought, we should see him everywhere, in every object we behold, as well as in every comfort we enjoy. Thus was it with Saint Paul. He knew that “of him, and through him, and to him, are all things;” and in all he saw, or heard of, or experienced, he discovered his beloved Lord. He found him with Israel in the desert. He shows him to us at Rephidim. In the rock which supplied the thirsty multitude with water, we have an emblem of his unchangeableness, divine appointment, and sufferings; and in the water itself, a representation of his saving, cleansing, and refreshing grace.

There is yet one point more in which the comparison holds, and one which gives fresh interest and value to all the rest. It is brought before us in the text. The psalmist describes the manner in which the waters flowed from the opened rock, and, in doing so, reminds us of the gracious terms on which the rich blessings of salvation are bestowed.

I. “He opened the rock.” It is clear then that the waters of which the Israelites drank, were not of their own discovering, or procuring, or deserving, but the unmerited gifts of divine mercy. They flowed from the rock *freely*; and the thirsty people drank of them without cost or labour.

We are all ready to admit in part the comparison which occurs to us here. We are all aware that man had no more to do with providing a Saviour for the world, than he had with creating the world. But the most important, because the most practical part of this resemblance, many of us are slow to perceive. We cannot be persuaded that he who has freely provided salvation for us will allow us freely to take it. Our self-righteousness, the dreadful pride of our heart, stands in our way; so that we disdain to accept even the glories of heaven without having done something to procure them. Look at the great mass of professing Christians: what is their religion? The suing of condemned criminals for pardon? The imploring of starving beggars for bread? Far from it. It is the toiling of a hireling for wages; the attempt of a worm to climb by its own efforts to the skies.

And even when the Spirit of Christ begins to humble the heart, the heart opens itself slowly and reluctantly to the reception of this truth. The sinner feels now that he really needs mercy; but then he still clings to the

idea that he must do something to make himself a proper object of mercy. He despairs of deserving heaven, but he yet hopes to deserve that grace which leads to heaven. "I know," he says, "that I am a sinner; I feel that I am a lost sinner. If I am ever saved, it must be grace that saves me. But can such a wretch as I, with such a heart as mine, dare to hope for salvation? No. This hard heart must be more thoroughly broken, my guilt must be more deeply bewailed, my sins must be in some degree subdued; then will I venture to draw near to the great Saviour, and implore the cleansing of his blood."

But the scripture speaks a different language. It represents the gospel as designed for the express purpose of showing "the exceeding riches" of Jehovah's grace; and so planned and ordered, that all whom it saves, are saved to "the glory of his grace." In other words, it is intended not merely to save the transgressor, but so to save him, that all may see in his salvation the wonderful grace of God. It follows therefore that any merit of any kind, on our part, would entirely frustrate the design of the gospel. It would turn its mercy into justice, and its grace into debt. It would, in fact, place us out of its reach.

Accordingly we find that whenever the gospel offers us mercy, it offers it as pure mercy; as a gift for which no price is demanded, and which looks for nothing in its receiver, but want and misery. This is its gracious proclamation, and the prophet seems to labour in it for words to express the freeness of its terms; "Ho, every one that thirsteth; come ye to the waters; and he that hath no money, come ye, buy and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk, without money and without price." And as though this were not enough, as though his servant had not even yet sufficiently declared the freeness of his love, the ascended Jesus takes up his language; "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give unto him that is athirst, of the fountain of the water of life freely." And in another place he adds yet to the force of this invitation, and then leaves it in his word as his last call of mercy to perishing man; "I Jesus have sent mine angel to testify unto you these things in the churches." "And the Spirit and the Bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst, come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely."

One thing then is clear, that the blessings of the gospel are as free to sinners, as the stream in the wilderness was to Israel. Desert is no more required in the one case, than in the other. The only qualification demanded is a sense of need—thirst, desire, a willing mind.

But now comes the question—To whom are these rich mercies thus freely offered? Let us turn to the desert for an answer.

II. The water flowed *openly* there. No barrier was raised around it. It “ran in the dry places,” the places where it was most needed, “like a river,” open to all who chose to drink of it, and at all times.

And of just the same boundless extent is the salvation of Christ. When the fountain of his grace was opened, it was left open; and for whom? Not for a select company of favoured individuals only, nor for a few of the least guilty of our race, but for a perishing world. All alike need it; and wherever the tidings of it come, all alike are invited to take of it. None are excluded, none are preferred. The vilest of ourselves is as welcome at the cross as the best; as welcome as a Paul, or a Peter, or a John; yea, as welcome to all “the unsearchable riches of Christ,” as the spirits of the just to the blessedness of heaven. “If any man thirst,” cried the Saviour aloud among a multitude eager to shed his blood, “let him come unto me and drink.” And after this desperate people had actually crucified the Lord of glory, we hear Peter declaring, declaring in the hearing of the very murderers of his Lord, and declaring expressly to them, “Whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord, shall be saved.” And the testimony of scripture is everywhere the same. Its invitations, its promises, its commands, its entreaties, its very threatenings, all proclaim aloud that the salvation of the gospel is as open as it is free, that there is not a contrite sinner on the earth excluded from its blessings.

It is cruel then to limit its offers of mercy, because they are sometimes abused; and it is still more cruel to explain them away, because they encumber some favourite system. We are standing among dying men, and while we are indulging our fears or contending for our systems, they are perishing. Our duty is plain. It is to leave God to control “the foolishness that perverteth his way,” and fearlessly to publish his great salvation. It is to point to the Saviour lifted up on the cross, and say, “Whosoever believeth in him shall be saved.”

I am not setting up this truth in opposition to any other of “the faithful and true sayings of God.” There is indeed none more precious, none to which a guilty sinner would more desire to cling; but “all scripture is given by inspiration of God,” and the man who “trembleth at his word,” will receive all with the same simple belief. I am not to reject or forget any part of my Bible, because my feeble understanding cannot discover its agreement with some other part. I am not called on to reconcile its declarations, but to believe them. Once admitted into my heart, they will reconcile themselves. And nothing but the experience of faith can reconcile them. Their power must be felt before their harmony can be known.

Here then we have a sure and broad foundation for a sinner to rest on—the waters of life flow openly and freely; they are to be had without money or price by all who desire them. Brethren, do you desire them? Are you, at least, conscious of your urgent need of them? Is sin your burden, your grief, your dread? Are you willing to accept deliverance from it? Then say no more

with the sorrowing women who were seeking their Lord, “Who shall roll us away the stone?” the stone is already gone; the fountain of mercy is already unlocked; the way to it is as open and plain, as infinite love can make it. As for fitness, in the willing mind which the Spirit has given you, you have all that God requires, all you ever can have, all that the redeemed in glory ever possessed. Think again of the fainting Jews. Did they refuse the water from the rock because they had just before been murmuring against him who gave it? Did they plead their guilt, or their extreme suffering, or their dying state, as a reason why they should hesitate to drink of the stream? Did they talk of waiting till their thirst and misery were partially gone? No; they joyfully “drank of the rock that followed them,” and they were welcome to its waters. Imitate their conduct. The stream of mercy is flowing down from the lofty heavens to your feet. Drink of it, that you perish not. In the midst of all that is grieving and discouraging you, cast yourselves just as you are on the free grace of the Lord. “Be not afraid, only believe,” is the language of Christ; now, at length, let the answer of each one of you be, “Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief.”

III. If this encouragement be not enough, the text suggests to us more. It describes the waters as flowing *abundantly* in the wilderness; “He opened the rock, and the waters gushed out,” as though eager to be gone where they were so much needed; “they ran in the dry places,” not in a scanty rivulet, but “like a river.” And in the seventy-eighth psalm, their abundance is yet more strikingly portrayed. They are no longer spoken of as a solitary river, but as “rivers,” as “overflowing streams,” and, at length, as seas; “He gave them drink as out of the great depths.”

And the very same language is employed to set forth the love of Christ in its abundance. “The glorious Lord,” Isaiah says, “will be unto us a place of broad rivers and streams.” But broad rivers are not always deep; another prophet therefore completes the description. Ezekiel beheld in vision the same stream of mercy as “waters to swim in,” as a river so deep that it could not be passed over. The apostles of our Lord bear the like testimony. Peter speaks of his “abundant mercy;” Paul, of his “exceeding abundant grace.” And what a high expression is that which he uses in his epistle to the Colossians! “It pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell.” He is not only gracious, but there is in him the “fulness” of grace; “all” its fulness; he is its great, its only storehouse, so that there is no grace to be found in the universe out of him. And in him it “dwells,” rests and abides.

Now all this, it may be, when referring generally to the grace that is in Christ, we readily believe. The difficulty begins when some particular operation of his love is singled out, and more especially when that happens to be

the very mercy which we most need. Then unbelief begins to question and limit; praise is changed into silence, and admiration into doubt.

“My sins,” says one, “are too numerous, too aggravated, too enormous, for pardon.” The Bible, however, speaks of a blood that “cleanseth from all sin;” of sins which were once “as scarlet,” now “white as snow;” of a pardon so extensive and full, that it casts all our sins into the very “depths of the sea.” It admits that sin abounds; it takes the matter up just as we represent it; but it testifies, at the same time, of a grace that “much more abounds.” And then, for a confirmation of its testimony, it shows us a Manasseh pardoned, a David saved, an executed criminal entering with Christ into paradise.

“My sins might be pardoned,” says another, “for what cannot infinite grace forgive? but this filthy heart never can be cleansed. Sin reigns in my inmost soul. O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me?” And then comes the despairing conclusion of idolatrous Israel of old; “There is no hope, no; for I have loved strangers, and after them will I go.” But what is the answer of Israel's God? “From all your filthiness will I cleanse you.” “Sin shall not have dominion over you.” “My grace is sufficient.” He bids us listen to the prayer of one of the guiltiest of our race, a prayer which was answered, a prayer which he has preserved in his word, that we may take it as our own: “Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.” He tells us of a Saul “breathing out threatenings and slaughter” against his disciples one hour, and the next a trembling suppliant at his feet; of one too vile to live, enabled in the agonies of death to discover in an expiring malefactor the King of heaven, displaying a humility and a faith which magnify the sanctifying power of God, even more than the salvation he found exalts his mercy.

“Pardon and grace,” says a third sinner, “I may find, but comfort is not for me; my misery is too deep, my heart too completely broken. Let others talk of peace; I shall go softly all my years in the bitterness of my soul. My only consolation lies in this, that the time is short; and this is my only earthly hope, that the daps of darkness between me and the grave may be but few.” This is often the saddest case of all, but this the gospel meets. “The Lord hath anointed me,” says Christ, “to comfort all that mourn; he hath sent me to heal the broken-hearted.” And how does he fulfil his office? Patiently, tenderly, effectually. “As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you, and ye shall be comforted.” Look at Peter. Was there not a time when his tears were as bitter as yours, and his grief as pungent, and his heart as despairing? And yet this man speaks afterwards, like one who was experiencing it, of a “joy unspeakable and full of glory.” Look at Paul—“sorrowful, yet always rejoicing;” the most afflicted man on the face of the earth, and yet the happiest.

Brethren, there is but one sorrow, but one sin, but one evil, for which there is not in Christ a remedy; and that is despair, obdurate unbelief of his word. Need what we may, desire what we may, he “is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think;” and if we inquire what he is willing to do, this is the measure of his bounty, “My God shall supply all your need, according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus.”

Nor is this a transient supply.

IV. The stream from Horeb ran in the wilderness *constantly*. Neither a burning sun nor a thirsty soil could dry it up, nor time nor distance lessen it. During eight and thirty years it followed Israel in all their wanderings. At Kadesh indeed it failed—why, we know not—but the miracle was again renewed, and the people still “drank of the rock that followed them,” till they entered Canaan.

Thus constant in its communication is the grace of Christ. It is as lasting as it is abundant. It took its rise in the eternal ages that are gone; it entered the world as soon as sin had made a way for it; it has ever since been flowing on like a mighty river, widening and deepening as it goes, and it will flow on as long as there is a mourner to be comforted, or a sinner to be cleansed. No drought can exhaust, nor cold arrest it. “Living waters,” saith the Lord, “shall go out from Jerusalem, half of them toward the former sea, and half of them toward the hinder sea: in summer and in winter shall it be.” And in eternity the stream of grace shall not be lost; it will be seen in heaven a pure river of life, making “glad the city of God,” a sea of salvation, an ocean of blessedness.

But we may bring this truth more closely home to ourselves. The grace of Christ follows the church in all ages; but this is not all—it follows every member of that church, every Israelite indeed, through all his earthly pilgrimage. And herein it reminds us of these four truths.

1. *We always need this grace.* All of us always need it; not merely the careless sinner and the fearful penitent; the holiest and the happiest man here needs it as much as the most guilty and comfortless. In this respect, brethren, there was no difference between the apostle Paul and the poor idolaters he preached to; in this respect, there is no difference between the best of you, and the vilest heathen on the earth. Grace does not render the soul independent; it does not make it less needy in itself. It supplies its wants, but it prevents not those wants from returning again. The food of yesterday does not satisfy the hunger of today. The rain which refreshed your fields and pastures in the last spring, is not sufficient for their supply in this. Your bodies do not more need daily bread, than your souls need daily grace.

And it will ever be so.. It matters not how long you have tasted that the Lord is gracious, nor how near to heaven his mercy may have brought you;

let mercy and grace cease to follow you, the consequence is certain—you are lost.

And who that loves the Saviour, would wish it to be otherwise? There is nothing degrading or painful in this dependence; there is something in it inexpressibly sweet. It endears Christ to the sinner, and the sinner to Christ. It makes the sinner so cleave to his Lord, that his whole life becomes a life of faith on the Son of God; it makes Christ more watchful over the penitent sinner, than the mother over the babe that depends on her for support.

2. Hence we may infer that *we may always have the grace we need*. Its very continuance on the earth is a proof that while on the earth, we can never seek it in vain.

There is a strange propensity in some young Christians to lose sight of this truth. They are exceedingly anxious about their future spiritual supplies. Grace for the present hour is all they can obtain: they know this; and yet they are restless, as though they would take at once supplies for eternity. This anxiety often proceeds from a fear lest eventually their sins should exhaust the divine patience, and shut up the fountain of mercy against them.

Now, brethren, in what state of mind were the Israelites, when the waters first gushed out from the rock? They were murmuring against their God. And what were they afterwards? Murmurers still. “They sinned yet more,” the psalmist says, “by provoking the Most High in the wilderness.” Yet the rock was not closed; their sins never dried up its streams.

Turn now to yourselves. When you first drank of the water of life, you were in a still worse condition than these Israelites. True, they were murmurers; but they joyfully accepted at once the relief provided for them in their misery. You, on the contrary, added yet this to your other sins—you long made scorn of the very blood that was shed to save you. And what have you been since? What are you now? Yet even now grace and mercy are brought home to your very hearts. At this present moment the blessings of the gospel are all spread out before you. At this present moment the invitation is sounding in your ears, “Eat, O friends; drink, yea, drink abundantly, O beloved.” Why then these harassing apprehensions for the future? Have you forgotten the past? Have you forgotten that the Rock of your salvation is unchangeable? that the Lord Jesus Christ is the same now, as in the days that are gone, and will be the same forever? You may be sinful, but he will not cease to be gracious. He will never save you in your sins, but he will always save you when flying to him for deliverance from them. For thus saith “the Lord that created the heavens, God himself that formed the earth, I said not unto the seed of Jacob, Seek ye me in vain.” “When the poor and needy seek water and there is none, and their tongue faileth for thirst, I, the Lord, will hear them; I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them.” And if these declarations do not meet your fears, he speaks to you yet again; “I will make an

everlasting covenant with them that I will not turn away from them to do them good; but will put my fear in their hearts, that they shall not depart from me.” “Whoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him, shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him, shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.” What then will you say in answer to these gracious promises? “I shall one day perish?” No. “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

3. If we always need the grace of Christ, and may always obtain it, it follows that *we ought always to seek it*.

Were the parched Israelites content with drinking once or at stated seasons of the spring of Horeb? No: they came to it as often as thirst returned; it was their daily refreshment on the burning sands, and their hourly comfort. And what other comfort or refuge have we, than Christ the Lord? Where else can we go for the strength we need to carry us to heaven? Nay, how can we bear the trials of this desolate wilderness without him?

Do we ask how often we should be found at his feet? But one answer can be given to the strange inquiry—as often as we have a sin to be pardoned, a defilement to be cleansed, a fear to be removed, a care to be lightened, a want to be supplied; as often as we breathe. Nothing less than this the apostle commands; “As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him.” To this he himself in some measure had attained; “The life which I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God.” And nothing short of this, if we are Israelites indeed, is our end and aim: we are never satisfied except when drawing near to Christ; we never deem ourselves safe except when hungering and thirsting after him; we are never completely wretched except when seeking happiness at a distance from him.

Abide then in Christ. Beware of forsaking this “fountain of living waters.” Beware of the “broken cisterns,” the streams of false comfort, of which the world is so full. They are worse than disappointing; there is a curse in them. Jeshurun tried them. He forsook the “God which made him, and lightly esteemed the Rock of his salvation.” And then the anger of the Lord was moved. He said, “I will hide my face from them; I will see what their end shall be. They have moved me to jealousy with that which is not God; they have provoked me to anger with their vanities. I will heap mischiefs upon them; I will spend mine arrows upon them. They shall be burnt with hunger, and devoured with burning heat and with bitter destruction.” And why all this awful displeasure?

4. Because, in the last place, *there is guilt, as well as folly, in despising the grace of Christ*.

Picture to yourselves a traveller parched with thirst, and ready to faint with anguish on a burning sand. In the extremity of his distress, a stream of

water bursts from a rock before his eyes, and follows his painful footsteps mile after mile. He is entreated to drink of it; but no; the man is playing with the pebbles at his feet, or digging for water in the thirsty ground. But what is his folly, when compared with that of the sinner who hears of the salvation of Christ, and yet is too much taken up with the vanities of sense to accept it?

We must not, however, talk of his folly; it is his guilt, which should most affect us. Not to make use of the grace which flows from a smitten Saviour, is to despise the richest love, to pour contempt on the deepest wisdom, that an infinite God ever manifested or ever could manifest to the sons of men. It is a guilt which forced the apostle to exclaim, "How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation?" We cannot escape; we must perish. And who can tell us what it is to perish with the curse of despised mercy on our heads? None but the lost. "To be thirsty in a desert," says a recent traveller, "without water, exposed to a burning sun, without shelter, and no hopes of finding either, is the most terrible situation that a man can be placed in." No, brethren, there is a situation still more terrible than this. What is a scorching desert to a burning hell? The merciful Jesus himself speaks of it as a world, the fire of which never can be quenched, and where not a drop of water can ever cool one tormented tongue.

And this fearful world is not, like an eastern desert, removed with its suffering far away from us: it is very near us; so near, that a few more careless steps may plunge us into its horrors. And how will this reflection aggravate them all, that they have been our own choice! that salvation was provided for us, but we scorned it! that overflowing mercy was offered, but we despised it! that there is bread enough and to spare in our Father's house, while we are eating the bread of bitterness with the devil and his angels!

Shall we continue easy with such a prospect before us? Let us rather say, "Wo unto them that are at ease!" let us rather change our quiet into fear, our unconcern into trembling. Let a prayer for deliverance come from every heart, and this cry from all our lips, "Lord, save; we perish."