

MOSES... . AND THE SMITTEN ROCK

Exodus 17:6; Numbers 21:] 1, 1 Corinthians 10:4

This exciting episode from the wilderness experiences of Israel is one of the most informative parts of the Scriptures. It tells of God's remarkable intervention on behalf of His people, and spans centuries of time to fascinate the apostle to the Gentiles. Paul did not hesitate to explain; that Rock was Christ.

"And all the congregation of the children of Israel journeyed from the wilderness of Sin . . . and pitched in Rephidim: and there was no water for the people" (Exod. 17:1). Moses was frustrated and annoyed. The people had been brought from Egypt, but they continued to criticize their leader. The boys and girls were asking for water, the lowing of the cattle announced their thirst, and the parched throats of men and women filled the nation with apprehension. The small bushes in the wilderness appeared to be dying; they were covered with sandy dust disturbed by many feet. The sky was as brass, and the hot winds of the desert destroyed every vestige of comfort. The tribes were extremely critical and asked, "Is the LORD among us, or not?" (Exod. 17:7). What had formerly been spoken in whispers was now being expressed openly. Moses was troubled, and "cried unto the LORD, saying, What shall I do unto this people? they be almost ready to stone me. And the LORD said unto Moses, Go on before the people, and take with thee of the elders of Israel; and thy rod, wherewith thou smotest the river, take in thine hand, and go. Behold, I will stand before thee there upon the rock in Horeb; and thou shalt smite the rock, and there shall come water out of it, that the people may drink. And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel" (Exod. 17:4-6). It was an astonishing sight when, from the heart of a rock, gushed a stream of water sufficient to satisfy all the needs of Israel. Yet unbelievers in every age ridiculed this account. Major C. S. Jarvis, who was British Governor of Sinai in the 1930s, wrote,

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Moses striking the rock at Rephidim, and the water gushing out, sounds like a genuine miracle, but the writer has actually seen this happen. Several men of the Sinai Camel Corps had halted in a dry wadi. and were in process of digging about in the rough sand at the foot of a rocky face. They were trying to get at water that was trickling slowly out of the limestone rock. The men were taking their time about it, and Bash Shawish, the colored sergeant, said, "Here, give it to me." He took the spade of one of the men, and began digging furiously in the manner of N.C.O.s the world over who want to shew their men how to do things, but have no intention of keeping it up for more than a couple of minutes. One of his violent blows hit a rock by mistake. The smooth hard crust which always forms on weathered limestone, split open and fell away. The soft stone underneath was thereby exposed, and out of the aperture shot a powerful stream of water. The Sudanese, who are well up in the activities of the prophets, but who do not treat them with a vast amount of respect, overwhelmed their sergeant with cries "Look at him! The prophet Moses." This is a very illuminating explanation of what happened when Moses struck the rock at Rephidim. (Quoted from Werner Keller, *The Bible as History* [New York: William Morrow and Company, 1955], 129-30.)

The Significance of a Name

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One of the names of Jehovah used often throughout the Old Testament was "the Rock"; it signified strength and stability. Moses complained that Jeshurun ". . . forsook God which made him, And lightly esteemed the Rock of his salvation" (Deut. 32:15). When David was approaching the end of his life, he said, "The LORD liveth; and blessed be my rock; And let the God of my salvation be exalted" (Ps. 18:46). The prophet Isaiah wrote, "And a man shall be as an hiding place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest; as rivers of water in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land" (Isa. 32:2). The same truth was expressed by the writers of the New Testament where Christ referred to Himself as the Rock, and afterward through the centuries, poets expressed the identical fact when they wrote the hymns "Rock of Ages" and "On Christ the Solid Rock I Stand." It was not surprising when Paul emphasized, that Rock was Christ.

Twice during the life of Moses the rock in the wilderness played a symbolic role in the affairs of the Hebrew nation. At Rephidim the

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patriarch smote the rock and water came forth to solve the problem of thirst. Forty years later at Meribah, he angrily smote the rock twice. Jehovah faithfully supplied the water, but the leader's indiscretion prevented his entry into Canaan (see Num. 20:11-12).

There was much rocky terrain in the Sinai peninsula, but the rock at Rephidim was God's Rock! The Almighty identified Himself with it when He stood there unseen (see Exod. 17:6). Similarly, God was never visibly apparent at Calvary when the rod of judgment fell upon the true Rock of our Salvation. Nevertheless, He was there for "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself" (2 Cor. 5:19). When the Savior was bruised for our iniquities, living water commenced flowing to provide help for a thirsty world. Isaiah was correct when he wrote, "But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed" (Isa. 53:5). Furthermore, what Christ supplies is free (see Rev. 22:17).

A Desperate Plight... "and there was no water for the people to drink"

Modern technology has dramatically changed conditions in Israel. Desalination plants now produce drinking water from the sea, and as a result, agriculture has been transformed. Nevertheless, even today people who live in the desert areas experience difficulty trying to quench their thirst. Pipelines carry supplies of water to remote areas, but prolonged droughts present enormous problems. It is therefore difficult to comprehend the situation that confronted Israel. The short but graphic statement "there was no water to drink" presented a situation that was dangerous and frightening. The people criticized their leader, but failed to understand his helplessness. God alone could supply their need.

Had the critical nation considered past deliverances and prayed, their danger would not have been so acute. It is to be regretted when desperate people receive answers to their prayers, but quickly forget from whence came their aid. Many years later crowds of people in Jerusalem heard Jesus saying, "If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink" (John 7:37). Unfortunately, later events proved people were more interested in quenching their thirst than in coming to Christ. God's indictment against Israel was justified when He said, "My people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water" (Jer. 2:13).

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Australians often speak of an illustrious man named Lassiter, who

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stumbled out of the desert, his pockets filled with gold nuggets. Alas, his wealth could not help him for excessive thirst had destroyed his sanity. Happy are the people who realize money cannot buy everything.

A Divine Presence ... "Behold, I will stand... upon the rock in Horeb"

Throughout the ages many people desired to see God, but others were afraid to look. Because He could not be seen with the naked eye, critics said He did not exist; hence David said, "The fool bath said in his heart, there is no God." Maybe the psalmist had to say "in his heart" because the critic possessed an undeveloped brain! It is interesting to remember that at Rephidim, God stood upon the rock from which came water. Moses, through faith, knew Jehovah was present, but unfortunately the rest of the observers saw nothing; they had cataracts upon their eyes! Perhaps when Paul spoke on Mars Hill in Athens, he had this thought in mind when he said, "... though he [God] is not far from any one of us." Spiritual people see most when they kneel; those whose knees never bend seldom see a thing! Wise folk look for the Lord in the most unlikely places: He once transformed a stable into a cathedral. The children of Israel believed God was near when they saw the cloud by day and the pillar of fire at night. Unless they saw a sign of His presence, they thought they were alone. It is wise to remember that Jesus said to Thomas, "Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed" (John 20:29). The writer to the Hebrews explained that Moses "endured, as seeing him who is invisible" (Heb. 11:27). Jehovah was present at the rock in the wilderness and also with His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. The Savior said to Philip, "Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip? he that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (John 14:9). If people desire to see God they should kneel before Christ and look up! Their search will be over; their desire granted.

A Definite Promise... "and there shall come water out of it"

It is inspiring to know that God's wells never run dry. He has always been able to complete what was commenced. At the beginning and end of the wilderness journey, Jehovah brought water from a most unlikely place. The psalmist wrote, "He clave the rocks in the wilderness, and gave them drink as out of the great depths. He brought streams also out of the rock, and caused waters to run down like rivers" (Ps. 78:15-16). The Amplified Bible translates the text, "He split rocks in the wilderness,

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and gave them drink abundantly as out of the deep." Evidently Moses made contact with an underground river whose supplies never diminished. The blow made by the rod of Moses could not, in itself, have split the earth; that would have necessitated an earthquake. It was apparent that God's word was sufficient to do what was necessary. He knew the precise place in the terrain where such a break was possible. Israel needed more than a casual drink. People and animals were dying of thirst and in all probability millions of gallons of fresh water were necessary. Hence the statement, He brought streams also out of the rock, and caused waters to run down like rivers."

Men who search for oil use modern equipment to bore deep holes into the earth. When contact is made with the desired commodity, underground pressure sends a gusher high into the air. God did not need drilling equipment; He spake the word and using the rod of Moses as His symbolic instrument, "split the rock" and tremendous pressure produced an enormous fountain, and the water ran down like rivers. The Amplified Bible says, "The water gushed out, and the streams overflowed" (Ps. 78:20). God has always fulfilled His promises, but this story revealed He did so magnificently. He remains the same from everlasting to everlasting (see Ps. 41:13).

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A Delightful Provision ... "the people may drink"

If the children of Israel desired to remain permanently, either at Rephidim or Maribah, their longings can be appreciated. It was an exhilarating sight to see that huge column of water spouting high in the air and filling the wilderness with rivers. The new conditions made agricultural miracles possible. The terrain could be made to blossom as the rose. The desert would become another Garden of Eden. Perhaps the people forgot their destination was Canaan. Temporal blessings could never become a substitute for eternal realities. Help received along the road of life, however valuable, should never diminish the desire to reach home.

It was written of the Rock of Ages, "Nor yet that he should offer himself often, as the high priest entereth into the holy place every year with blood of others; For then must he often have suffered since the foundation of the world: but now once in the end of the world hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself" (Heb. 9:25-26). What was accomplished at Calvary was completed for all time. There will never be another sacrificial death of the Redeemer. The once-smitten Rock will supply living water until the end of time!

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Forty years after the miracle at Rephidim, Moses was told to speak to the rock, but an interesting fact sheds light upon the importance of God's command. Moses did not smite the rock with the same rod. He used Aaron's rod, which was taken "from before the LORD" (see Num. 20:8-9). This represented the work of Israel's high priest and God's covenant to receive petitions on behalf of His people. Unfortunately, the anger of Moses was a costly error that removed the privilege of leading the nation into the Promised Land. Christ, our Rock of Ages, will never be smitten again. We may speak to Him, and if our prayers be in accordance with the divine will, they will be answered.

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