

THERFIELD CHAPEL EVENING SERVICE

15th June 2003

Exodus 17:1-7 The Rock that Bled

What is a Rock?

What do think of when you think of a Rock? What sort of ideas or emotions does that word convey?

If you're into wrestling or B-rated action films, you might think of Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson – a typically ebullient wrestler, larger than life at 6'5" tall and over 18 stone, with a good line in pre-fight banter where he speaks of himself as "The Rock" rather than "I" or "me" to intimidate his opponents (or is it to whip up the crowds?) – "The Rock says The Rock is going to smash you", and so on.

Dwayne, or perhaps his agent, chose his stage-name wisely – for The Rock speaks of strength rather than weakness, of crushing blows rather than feeble punches, of an immovable object rather than something easily pushed aside.

If you are a child of the '60s, or one of the many to be influenced by its music, then you might think of Simon and Garfunkel's famous song, "I am a Rock". A memorable tune to be sure, with a catchy refrain that many pick up even today: "I am a Rock, I am an Island". What did they mean by this?

In truth their song is a bleak one. Like many songs since with a catchy chorus, we might not be so quick to hum our approval if we really listened to the lyrics, and thought about the message that they are putting across:

*I've built walls,
A fortress deep and mighty,
That none may penetrate
I have no need of friendship;
friendship causes pain.
It's laughter and it's loving I disdain.
I am a rock, I am an island.
If I never loved I never would have cried.
I am a rock, I am an island.
I touch no one and no one touches me.
I am a rock, I am an island.
And a rock feels no pain;
And an island never cries.*

In their song, the rock is a place of safety, but also of isolation from the rest of society. Their rock is unassailable rather than vulnerable, independent rather than dependent; but it is also hard rather than soft, and unfeeling rather than feeling. It's strength comes from its immutability, it's ability to be unchanged and untouched by events around it.

Is that the sort of Rock you want to be?

Yet we also speak of people being a Rock for someone else – like a wife who describes her husband as her Rock. There she is speaking not of his aloofness, but of his

dependability. Her rock is faithful rather than unfaithful, consistent rather than inconsistent, a source of strength, confidence and security, of certainty rather than doubt.

Perhaps this is more the sort of rock you want?

I say all this because it is important for us to understand the significance of the incident in tonight's passage. For if you think this story is merely about God's ability to provide for his people during their journey through the desert, then I afraid you've missed the point. But don't worry – so did the Israelites at the time.

Why lead the people to thirst?

It is of course true that God can provide for his people in miraculous ways, if he so chooses. But if this is all God had to show them, then it seems vindictive and even sadistic of God to lead his people away from an abundant natural oasis, to the point that they could go no further because of thirst. So why would he do this?

Remember that there were hundreds of thousands of women and children besides the menfolk here; people who were used to a form of hardship in Egypt, but who were not used to being a day or two's march from the nearest source of water. It would be a frightening and unpleasant experience for them; no doubt little children would be crying, older children would be grumbling and moaning, and parents would be getting agitated.

What were they doing here? What right had Moses to lead them into such a dangerous predicament? These were natural questions to ask, but their complaints went beyond that. If God is so great, why has he not provided water for them? Maybe God is not with them at all, and the previous signs they have seen, like crossing the sea and even the manna, are just coincidences. Note that it is doubt which is singled out in verse 7 as the most significant problem.

This barrage of complaints clearly flusters Moses, for it seems the less civilised of the crowd are about to resort to violence to depose him! His response is commendable – he turns straight to God, and hands the problem over to him. God's instruction is quite clear, and Moses obeys. He is led to the right rock by God, and in view of the Elders, he strikes the rock with his staff and lo and behold, a stream of water pours out!

Now considering the number of people to be provided for, there must have been quite a torrent of water rushing out – a very impressive sight by all accounts!

--- Look at pictures of possible site for this

Learning the lesson

Once they had satisfied their thirst, what would they learn from this experience?

The most obvious lesson is that their God will provide for them what they need, even when the situation seems to be completely hopeless. And of course that is true. But this is the same lesson which they have been taught time and again since before they left Egypt, and sadly it has not sunk in. We looked at this in some depth last month, how whenever they were pulled towards God by some great experience of his care and protection, they were pulled back to their old ways by their sin.

But this sign is capable of teaching them – and us – much more than this.

I raised the question a moment ago about why God would lead his people through this? The answer is, quite simply, so that he could perform this exact sign for them. His purpose was more than to provide water for his people when they needed it. If that were all he wanted to achieve, he could have arranged for another oasis to be there, or for great rains to come, or any number of other ways of giving them water. Instead, He planned that they should receive water from a rock which had been struck open.

The sign of the Rock

So what is this all about? What significance would the Israelites place on this sign, and what significance does it have for us?

Well, as we saw earlier Rock is symbolic of strength, permanence, dependability, independence, faithfulness, confidence, and security. Who does that remind you of? God himself, of course. Indeed, throughout the OT God is referred to as their Rock, from Jacob's blessing in Genesis 49, Moses song in Deuteronomy 32 (from which one of our choruses comes from), through countless psalms and on into many of the prophets.

Water, on the other hand, although much softer and hence weaker than Rock, was and is vital to life. You can live for many weeks without food, but without water you will die in a matter of days. Water brings life to the fields too, something which the Israelites would be quite familiar with in the flood-plains of the Nile. Water brings life even to the desert.

So the picture of water coming from the rock is a picture of life coming from God. Quite profound of itself, but there is more. This water only came from the rock when it was struck and split. Until then the Rock was perfectly rock-like, but the people were dying of thirst. Only when the Rock itself was smitten did the life-giving water flow out.

So this life which comes from God can only come when God himself is smitten and broken!

One final element of the picture is that the Rock was broken by Moses, God's representative, striking it with the staff, which had been used several times before to demonstrate God's power.

So the full picture which God had gone to such trouble to paint was that he himself would be broken by his own power, and in so doing would pour out life to his people.

Here we have a graphic illustration of the Gospel, given to the Israelites 1500 years or so before Christ came. That was God's purpose in leading them to Rephidim – not to provoke them to anger, not to cause them suffering or distress, but to show them what his plan for full salvation was.

Why repeat the sign?

So why did God repeat the sign in Numbers 20?

Well, some people hold that these two events are actually the same, but appear twice due to confusion or clerical error; so maybe he didn't repeat it at all!

But when you look closer, it seems pretty clear that the two incidents are separate.

For a start, the two events happen in different places. In Exodus, it is at Rephidim, but in Numbers it is Kadesh.

Numbers 33 gives a very useful summary of the 30 places which the Israelites camped at during their 40 years in the wilderness, and from this we can fit these two places into their journey. Rephidim appears relatively early on, about five camps after their stay at the luxury resort of Elim. Kadesh, on the other hand, is the ninth-last camp before they crossed the Jordan, and it was while camped there that Aaron died.

So the two incidents are separated by about 40 years, and by the giving of the law, the great disobedience of the people, and the 40 years of life in the desert which that resulted in.

By Numbers 20, there would only be a handful of people who were adults at the time of the first incident. Some would remember it from their childhood, but for most it would be something they knew only second hand.

So perhaps it was necessary for God to repeat the sign so that the message was brought home to a new generation?

But the repetition was not exact. There were important differences which can teach us even more.

Perhaps you were puzzled in the second account by God's very harsh treatment of Moses. I do feel sorry for Moses at this point – he has faithfully led the people for forty hard years in the desert, and is on the brink of leading them into the promised land – a land which he himself has never seen. What a disappointment it must have been to be told that, after all his faithful service, he would not be allowed into the land!

We know God is not a spiteful or vindictive God; but that he is pure and holy. So Moses must have done something seriously wrong in God's eyes to be treated like this. The reason given in 20:12 is:

“Because you did not trust in me enough to honour me as holy in the sight of the Israelites,”

Moses' Mistake

But what had he actually done?

Well, when we look closely we see that Moses receives different instructions on how to get water from the rock. The first time, he is told to “strike the rock”; but the second time, he is told merely to “speak to it”. But in fact Moses, perhaps because he remembered how it had worked last time, perhaps because he was impatient or angry, strikes the rock twice.

In so doing, he spoils the illustration which God had prepared for his people.

Yes, he was reminding them that it was from himself that new life would flow; *but this time there was no need for the rock to be struck*. Having been struck once, new life could flow simply on request! It was not necessary for God to be smitten over and over again – the one event was enough to provide abundant life to all. The plan God had made to bring salvation to his people *before* he had given them the law was still the same *after*: Having now received the law, and become used to the system of regular sacrifice, it was particularly important that they should know that just one perfect sacrifice was going to be enough for all people for all time.

But Moses spoilt this picture by striking the rock, and not only once but twice! No wonder God was angry with him.

Remembering the Past

Now the Israelites placed a high importance on remembering the events of their past – encouraged, of course, by God himself to do so. Like most cultures, including our own, one of the most powerful ways they had of doing this was by annual celebrations – a cunning plan which enticed people to remember otherwise dull history by throwing a big party with lots of food and drink, and plenty of entertainment, some of which was designed to ingrain the history into young or not-so-young minds.

One of the greatest of these festivals was the Feast of Tabernacles, a seven-day affair which was particularly exciting because it involved camping outside as well as the usual feasting. Although when it was established in Leviticus 23 & Deuteronomy 16 it makes no reference to water-from-the-rock, but rather is a sort of harvest festival, it appears that over time God's provision of water was also explicitly remembered in the festival, by ceremonial water-pouring and perhaps by the odd water-fight too.

The Sign Fulfilled

Some 1500 years after the incident in Exodus 17, the Jews were celebrating the Feast of Tabernacles as they always did. But this year there was more excitement than usual in the air, with an open conflict between the hypocritical religious establishment and a popular teacher and miracle worker. This is what happened at the climax of the feast, according to John 7:

³⁷ On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. ³⁸ Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him. " ³⁹ By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified

Jesus was claiming to be the Rock from which living water would flow – something confirmed by 1 Corinthians 10:4, as John pointed out last week.

A few days later, Jesus was smitten – crucified by men, and rejected by his Father. The rock did indeed split, both physically as the spear was thrust into his side, bringing a flow of blood and water, and spiritually as his heart and soul broke through being separated from his Father God.

That was a once-for-all event; the one and only time that the Son of God himself was struck and died.

After Jesus had been raised from the dead and ascended into heaven – when as Jesus himself puts it he had been glorified – the second part of the picture-prophecy was fulfilled – when the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost.

Life through the Spirit

This was a truly life-giving event.

Imagine the thirst which the Israelites felt after perhaps a day or two of marching through the desert without any water. Imagine how desperate they were for water, how much they realised they depended on such a simple thing to stay alive, how little any other possessions they might have would matter. For if you realise you will die of thirst unless you get water, then it would be wise to give up everything else you had to get some, if it came to it.

Imagine then the joy and relief that they would experience as the water flowed from the rock, as they were able to drink their fill, and come back for more to this new miraculous river.

In the same way that new life flowed into their parched and shrivelled bodies as they drank the water, so new life flowed into those first disciples as they were filled with the Holy Spirit. This was what the heart of man had longed after for millennia, often without realising it – to have an intimate relationship with his creator God once more.

Through the breaking of the rock, Christ, this was now possible. Our parched and shrivelled souls can be re-hydrated by the water of the Spirit, so that we can be the people we were created to be.

The Holy Spirit has a vital role to play in our lives as Christians, and there is no doubt that God wants us to be filled with the Spirit, Ephesians 5:

¹⁵ Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, ¹⁶ making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. ¹⁷ Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. ¹⁸ Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. ¹⁹ Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, ²⁰ always giving thanks to God the Father for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²¹ Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Paul contrasts being filled with the Spirit to being drunk on wine – I wonder if that had the same humour to Paul as it could do in English – don't be filled with alcoholic spirits, but be filled with the Holy Spirit! You see, getting drunk reveals the base side of us: it brings us low, dulls our reactions, confuses our thinking, reduces our inhibitions, and can lead us to speak and act in depraved ways.

In complete contrast, being filled with the spirit reveals God's image in us, bears us up, heightens our reactions and our awareness of the true reality (which, of course, is God!); it *purifies* our thinking and helps us to live accordingly. It is the re-hydration of our souls.

It is important – vital in fact – to realise that, once we have received Christ as our Saviour, His spirit has entered us and will stay with us come what may; but there are times when we are *filled* with him, so there is no room for anything else; and other times when we have so many other things in our hearts and minds that he only has a little room in our lives.

Don't let that worry you – let it be an encouragement in the times when you are not filled with him that he has not left you! It is to be expected. But the wise amongst us will long to be filled again, and God will respond to that longing in his own way and time.

This filling, this new relationship with God, this new life, is only possible because the Rock allowed himself to be broken. For all his strength, permanence, independence and security, this Rock is not unfeeling and emotionally hard like the Rock that Simon and Garfunkel sang of 40 years ago.

Their rock knew no love and could feel no pain. Our rock is the source of all love, and bled and died because of his love for us.

Which Rock will you trust in?