

"Speak ye unto the rock."

Numbers 20.

W. Kelly.

The rebellion of Korah brought out the priesthood of Aaron more conspicuously than ever. Ministry is not priesthood, though it has its own important place. But priesthood alone can and will carry the failing people of God through the wilderness into Canaan. "If when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more being reconciled we shall be saved by His life." "Wherefore He is able to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by Him, seeing He ever liveth to make intercession for them." On Christ first the sacrifice, next the priest rests, unto salvation. For as yet we are passing through the wilderness, and with difficulty are the righteous saved.

God is faithful who will not suffer us to be tempted above that we are able, but will with the temptation make also the way of escape that we may be able to endure it. For we have not a high-priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, but One that hath been in all points tempted like as we are, sin excepted. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace for seasonable help (Heb. 4.)

The necessity for Aaron's intercession was made apparent when the plague set in among the murmuring Israelites, and Aaron had to run into the midst, having put on incense and made an atonement for the people. Thus he stood between the dead and the living; and the plague was stayed.

But God did more. He decided for ever between the princes of the people and the priest of His choice. For every one of the twelve heads of Israel laid up their rods before the Lord that He might choose beyond controversy who should intercede with Him. "And behold, the rod of Aaron for the house of Levi was budded, and brought forth buds and bloomed blossoms and yielded almonds." All the other rods were dry and fruitless. On the morrow Aaron's rod alone burst forth into life, buds, blossoms, and fruit. The question was once for all determined: he only was chosen to draw near. Israel in themselves were as sapless and sere as their dead rods. Man needs a living priest. Aaron's rod (and indeed Melchisedec yet more in this) but typifies Him in whom is the power of an endless life. Henceforth this is the rod, the living unchanging witness of divine power and suited blessing before God for the people. The priest bears the iniquity of the sanctuary. Ministry is subordinate to priesthood; as the tribe of Levi was joined to the priest (Num. 18). And grace for all provided, the ashes of the red heifer, that the defiled among the children of Israel might at no time want a purification from sin. For they were always exposed to uncleanness by the way, and they must then be sprinkled by the water of separation, in order to be purified. God would not lower His holiness by the allowance of defilement in His people; but He provides for the defiled the water of separation, that the unclean should be daily purified. Grace reigns through righteousness unto eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Here the new generation is seen to be tried before the close, as the old had been at the beginning of Exodus. Now as then there was no water for the congregation; and they gathered themselves together against Moses and against Aaron. "And the people chode with Moses and spake saying, Would God that we had died when our brethren died before the Lord! Why have ye brought up the congregation of the Lord into this wilderness that we and our cattle should die there? And wherefore have ye made us to come up out of Egypt to bring us in unto this evil place? It is no place of seed, or of figs, or of vines, or of pomegranates; neither is there any water to drink." No wonder Moses and Aaron fell upon their faces at such base unbelief. But the glory of Jehovah appeared; and without a reproach Jehovah said to Moses, "Take the rod, and gather the assembly together, thou and Aaron thy brother,

and speak ye unto the rock before their eyes, and it shall give forth, its water and thou shalt bring forth to them water out of the rock: so thou shalt give unto the congregation and their beasts drink" (ver. 8).

There was no misunderstanding; for "Moses took the rod from before the Lord as He commanded him; and Moses and Aaron gathered the congregation together before the rock." From this point however all was wrong. For Moses, provoked by the exceeding ingratitude and revolt of the people, "spake unadvisedly with his lips." "Hear now, ye rebels; must we fetch you water out of this rock?" Who asked this at his hands? Moses was overcome of evil instead of overcoming evil with good. He who had so long lived the meekest of men utterly failed in this very respect at last. When God was magnifying His mercy and calling attention expressly to the truth that nothing but priestly grace could bring an erring people through, Moses yielded to natural resentment and asserted his own authority: "so that it went ill with him for their sakes." He had sunk so far to their level, instead of hiding himself, as faith would have done, behind the grace of God. And his deed was no better than his word at this critical moment. "Cease ye from man whose breath is in his nostrils; for wherein is he to be accounted of?" "And Moses lifted up his hand and with his rod smote the rock twice" (ver. 11). Who, I say again, asked this at his hands? It was total departure from the commandment of the Lord, who had told him to take "the rod," not his rod but Aaron's, and "speak unto the rock," and it should give forth water. With his rod Moses *struck* the *rock* twice.* The witness, hitherto faithful, misrepresented God and must die for his error. The rod of judgment misused brought death to himself, the rod of grace prevailed for the people. For he had brought out the rod, the virtue of which alone was adequate for so failing a people.

* Indeed In the Vatican Septuagint the error is sanctified; for the translators make the Lord to tell Moses to take "his" rod; and my that Moses took "his" rod which was before the Lord: so completely did they miss the mind of God in the contrast of the two rods. The Vulgate and other Versions confound the two.

In Exodus 17 it was according to God that Moses should strike the rock with his rod. There Moses alone appears. From the smitten rock water must come out. Jesus came by water and blood. Humiliation unto death must be the portion of Christ, if the people, of God were to receive the Spirit. There must be a foundation of righteousness and there is. The Son of man must be lifted up.

But now, for the journeying of the people through the wilderness, for passing into Canaan; grace alone avails, the grace of an ever-living priest. Wounded and resentful, feeling could avail nothing. "If thou, Lord, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand?" "Enter not into judgment with thy servant, for in thy sight shall no man living be justified." "Hear now ye rebels" might be true and even just, if it were a question of man; but was it God's word for that moment? Was He acting in grace or in judgment? And if it were added "must we fetch you water out of this rock," was God before their eyes? Was it not self-wounded by the ingratitude of man?

Wondrous to say the servant's error hindered not this grace of God. "For the water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank and their beasts also."

"But Jehovah spake unto Moses and Aaron, Because ye believed me not to sanctify me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore ye shall not bring this congregation into the land which I have given them. This is the water of Meribah, because the children of Israel strove with the Lord and He was sanctified in them." Moses and Aaron sanctified Him not, but gave up grace for the vindication of their injured authority. Had this been God's feeling, they had fetched no water out of the rock. Jehovah was sanctified; but it was in maintaining His own word, His own grace, notwithstanding the failure of Moses and Aaron: a failure which brought immediate reproof on themselves, and the sharp chastening of dying outside the land, the land of Canaan, whither grace was conducting the people.