

Christ Jesus, our Manna in the wilderness*Deuteronomy 8:1-5*

All the commandments which I command thee this day shall ye observe to do, that ye may live, and multiply, and go in and possess the land which the LORD sware unto your fathers. ² And thou shalt remember all the way which the LORD thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness, to humble thee, and to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldest keep his commandments, or no. ³ And he humbled thee, and suffered thee to hunger, and fed thee with manna, which thou knewest not, neither did thy fathers know; that he might make thee know that man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the LORD doth man live. ⁴ Thy raiment waxed not old upon thee, neither did thy foot swell, these forty years. ⁵ Thou shalt also consider in thine heart, that, as a man chasteneth his son, so the LORD thy God chasteneth thee.

Dear Christian Friends,

The Christian religion has often been accused of Jew bashing. This is especially the case during the season of Lent, when we observe what Jesus' own people did to Him in His passion. These critics forget that with the exception of Luke, all of the New Testament was written by Jews. They forget that the Old Testament is hardly any different when describing the behavior of the people whom God chose from amongst the nations of the world to be His own. It is not the New Testament alone that accuses Israel of rejecting the Son of God, turning to idols, and killing the prophets. It is the Old as well. When we read our Bibles it is natural to be caught up in disdain as we watch this people throughout history. The history of Israel can accurately be described as the history of a people whom God had to drag kicking and screaming out of slavery, idolatry, and every vice, in order to give them the greatest blessings the world has ever known. Our first thought, quite accurate as far as it goes, is that they were not worthy. Our second should be, if they were not worthy, than nobody is.

Israel was a remarkable nation. They were the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, remarkable men who talked directly with God. So it was throughout the history of Israel. God talked to them, sometimes with an audible voice, usually through the voice of His prophets. He gave them a written record of creation, and of their own history. He caused the utterances of His prophets to be recorded in written form for all future generations. He promised them a deliverer, repeating that promise in each generation, adding greater detail as the time drew near. These were the oracles of God, given through Israel, to the world. What a remarkable nation that makes them! They were also a people with some extraordinary figures, men who were remarkable in their faithfulness to God, their utter trust, and their courage. So

not only did Israel have the only direct revelation of God, they also had extraordinary men as examples which they should have followed. What we should remember of Israel is not only how reprobate, disobedient, stubborn, and wicked they were, but how remarkable they were above all the nations of the earth. There was no better nation to be found, none more holy and righteous, none who heard God's Word more faithfully. In short, when we look upon them we should remember that even when men are given every possible advantage, when they have a rich heritage, proper discipline, good laws, an ideal system of justice, a perfect moral code, countless incentives to do good, and even countless miracles which put to shame all the wonder-workers and shamans of the pagan world, when they are miraculously preserved by divine power over and over again, not even all of this is sufficient to keep them from disobedience, rebellion, and wickedness. Man at his best, with every possible advantage, is still at his worst. Israel proved it.

Israel, therefore, is you and me. They are every man and woman and child. Remember that as you see them fall again and again. Remember that also as you see the Lord patiently deal with them. Remember this as you see Jesus, particularly on this Sunday, when He in His temptations, proves Himself to be everything that Israel, and therefore we, are not. He is the true manna from heaven, which feeds us entirely by God's grace.

Our lesson today is an admonition, spoken by Moses, to Israel as they were about to enter the promised land. It is helpful to recount what brought them to this place, so that you may see the wondrous way in which Jesus has is the perfect substitute for Israel, and for you and me. After their baptism in the Red Sea, the children of Israel spent forty years in the wilderness, where they succumbed to pretty much every temptation which the devil could devise. They had hardly left Egypt when they made their first idol. Then followed a great deal of murmuring, complaining, and rebellion. They were chastened by the Lord many times. Their sin culminated finally in open rebellion against the Lord, when all but Moses, Joshua, and Caleb refused to enter the promised land to which the Lord had brought them. Since they would not obey the commandment of the Lord to go in and possess the land, the Lord chastened them yet again. This time it was very grievous. For forty years they would wander in the wilderness, and would not see the promised land. So it was, forty years later, as Moses is here speaking, only he, Joshua and Caleb remained who could remember the land of Egypt and the old taskmasters. Throughout the forty years wandering, Israel had proof beyond doubt that God was with them, and that His Word was always sure and right. When they hungered, he fed them with manna from heaven. He brought water from a rock and they drank of it. After forty years, their clothing did not grow threadbare, nor did their feet swell un-

der the strain of wandering. Though they were chastened, yet they were also comforted and preserved by God. Throughout that time, it was not by the sweat of their brow that they ate and lived, but by the creative power of the Word of God.

Our Lord Jesus also had His baptism, like Israel of old, after which He went into the wilderness. There He spent forty days wandering, during which time He fasted, eating nothing. He prayed, meditated upon the Word of God, and prepared for His ministry, and also for His passion. There, after He was weakened with hunger, the devil began to tempt Him in all the ways that a man might be tempted. He offered Him food and wealth, power, authority, and the adoration of the crowds. Jesus remained faithful to the Lord. In each of these temptations He prevailed against the devil with the Word of God. He did not murmur, nor complain. When the devil finally withdrew, the holy and perfect life of Jesus was intact. He met every temptation, and obeyed His Father in all things. Then, at the end of His forty days, He entered into the promised ministry of the Messiah, and kept every commandment of His Father perfectly. In every way, Jesus' sojourn in the wilderness mirrored that of Israel as its opposite. By it Jesus showed that where all of His ancestors had failed, He would succeed. He would succeed because He Himself *was* what what God provided Israel in the wilderness. He was the bread of life, the manna of God, sent down from heaven to feed His people.

Therefore as we were tempted, so was Jesus. We disobeyed, but He followed every commandment perfectly. We were sustained in the wilderness by the grace of God, who kept us by the power of His Word. Jesus sustained Himself with that Word. Israel was there chastened to prepare them for the promised land. Christ disciplined Himself to prepare for His ministry of grace. In the wilderness, Israel demonstrated their fallen nature. Christ demonstrated His perfect vicarious life.

Israel's years of wandering are a picture of our own wandering in the world. They journeyed through a wilderness as a people with no land of their own. Their land was a promise, yet to be received. As they wandered, they looked in hope toward that promise, knowing that someday their journey would be at an end. In the wilderness they endured many trials. The way was hard. Food and water were scarce. Yet God kept them. He preserved them from hunger, from thirst, from their enemies, and from the wild beasts and serpents. Yet they were kept by the power of God. He fed them and watered them in marvelous ways which reminded them constantly of His power and compassion. In all these ways, our sojourn in this world mirrors theirs. And while it is true that all our bodily needs are met in this world by our gracious Lord, the true manna with which He feeds us is the Word of His Son. As we are assailed by the devil, and tempted into numerous sins, as we are weak and poor, and have no power to

overcome Him, it is Christ Himself, who works within and among us through His Word, that steps in and answers the devil.

And now, as with Israel of old, God bids us to observe all His commandments, that it may be well with us, that we might endure unto the end and enter the promised land of Heaven. Do not think of His commandments lightly, nor consider it unimportant to keep them, for if you give yourself over as servants to disobedience and death, it is finally death that you shall receive, and you will not see Heaven at all. His commandments are the true and right way. If a man follows them he will always do well, but if he despises them, he will fall under their curse. As Israel did, we teach these commandments to our children, so that they will learn the way of righteousness. None of us can use the excuse in the end that we did not know what God desired of us.

But if Israel, who represents man at his best, could not keep the commandments, what does this say for us? It is true that they could not keep them, but it is also true that God blessed them when they remembered His Law, and earnestly endeavored to obey Him, even though they did so in such a poor and halting way. Does this mean that God will bless us if we try to do our best? Not at all. It means that when the Law of God is our delight, when we love it, and strive to keep it, our Lord shall indeed bless us, even though we have failed Him.

No one can delight in the Law of the Lord unless God has revealed His grace and mercy. No one can strive to obey the Lord willingly, with a clean heart, unless God has ended the fear of death. Therefore it is by Christ alone that we can delight in the Law of the Lord. He has removed the threat of death from the Law by taking all the Laws punishments upon Himself. Where we have failed, He has succeeded in keeping every precept and commandment In our place He has borne every temptation that can possibly tempt us. He has removed despair, and banished the fear of death. Even our sufferings He has sanctified by His own suffering on the cross. He has ended the condemnation of the Law entirely. "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit" (Romans 8:1). Therefore, free from the curse and every threat, we are free to delight in that same Law that once condemned us, to strive to obey and keep it even in our weakness. Now those labors are not in vain, but are the fruits of love. How wonderful it is to hear and keep the commandments of our Lord now that the threat of death has been removed! Truly Christ Jesus makes it a delight to be the children of God.

May our manna from heaven, Jesus Christ, ever feed us with His Word, which falls new upon us each day, that we might never grow weary in the wilderness, but lift up our eyes, and possess the promised land where the eternal waters of life ever flow. Amen.