

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!” (Phil. 4:4). That’s one of my favorite verses in the whole Bible. It’s encouraging and uplifting. And we need that. Because the truth is, being a Christian isn’t always easy. In some ways, you’d think that it *would* be; that the Christian life would be more glorious, more wonderful, even more enjoyable. After all, God’s Word says that we are a royal priesthood, a chosen people (1 Peter 2:9). We are sons and daughters of the one, true *heavenly King*. But when we look at our lives, they seem so very plain and ordinary, full of all the pains and hardships, and all the other frustrations and failures that are common to everyone. And when we take an honest look at our own lives, our own hearts, they oftentimes don’t look any holier, any more special, than those of unbelievers. It’s for reasons like these life as a Christian can sometimes be... discouraging.

On that note, we come today to our Old Testament Reading, a picture of the children of Israel. After 430 years of slavery in Egypt, God amazingly delivered His people from their bondage, and from the brutal oppression of Pharaoh. On that dramatic Passover night, they ate a lamb, and with its blood they marked their doors. The angel of death passed over their homes, convincing Pharaoh to let them go. And then, in yet another dramatic act of salvation, God led His Israelites through the waters of the Red Sea, drowning Pharaoh’s army, with all its chariots and horses. The Israelites rejoiced greatly and said, “I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea” (Ex 15:1). They were God’s people, redeemed and saved from their enemy. And they were on their way to the Promised Land. Who wouldn’t rejoice?!

So, what came next for the Israelites? Well, their new life got off to a good start. After the exodus, God led His people to a place called Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees. It was as if the Israelites had reached the Promised Land, as if they were already tasting paradise. Not one, but *twelve* springs of water, for the twelve tribes of Israel. Not a few, but *seventy* palm trees, to provide shade and food. The numbers point forward to the paradise of heaven. The scene points forward to the city of heaven, described in the last chapter of Revelation, through which the river of life runs. It points forward to the tree of life, which grows on either side of the river, with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. Yes, Elim, was a foretaste of the feast to come, a sneak peek at paradise where we will rejoice together in God’s presence forever!

But we’re not there yet. Here on earth, good times are followed by bad, happy times by hardship. And no emotional high down here can last forever. As we are reminded with the Church season of Lent which follows right on the heels of Jesus’

glorious Transfiguration. That amazing time on the mountaintop is followed by a pilgrimage through the valley down below and then on to Calvary. For the Israelites, **their** first crisis came with hunger. After leaving Elim, they headed out into the desert. After about a month, things turned sour. They had no food. They were hungry, **really** hungry. For a lot of us, hunger isn't much of a problem. But the Israelites were hungry and began to long for Egypt, the land of slavery, where at least they had food. And we know the story. How God rained down upon them bread from heaven, and how they ate and were satisfied.

And now, still in the desert, we come to crisis number two. Moving along through the desert, according to the commands of God, they camped at a place called Rephidim. The problem was, there was no water. Now, that's a **big** problem. Bigger than a lack of food. That's why some warn us always to keep bottled water on hand, just in case of emergency. And if you've ever been thirsty, really thirsty, like when you're on a long hike on a hot day, you know how bad it can be. Your mouth dries, your energy wanes, and there's nothing else you can think about. And then, think about all the mothers, worried about their children going without. This was a really big deal. Things were looking bad.

Sometimes, we think about the Israelites as grumblers, as ungrateful. And that's true. But in **this** case, they had good reason to wonder, "What is God up to? Why has He delivered us out of Egypt if we're going to go hungry and thirsty? Why has He led us out of the land of death, only to let us die in the wilderness?"

And as a Christian, you might feel this way from time to time. If God has done so much to deliver me, to save me from sin, death, and the devil, why has He let me down? Why has He left me suffering? If He is a gracious God, why doesn't He provide? If He's the source of goodness, why doesn't a little more of that goodness come my way?

Prosperity Gospel preachers like Joel Osteen promise a better life, saying that Christ wants you to live in abundance, with every earthly blessing, right here and now. But that doesn't seem to be the way God deals with His people.

Now, it's interesting to see what happens next. The people, thirsty with the kind of thirst most of us have never known, asked Moses, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" (v 3b). So, Moses cried out, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me" (v 4b). The Lord then told Moses to take some elders with him and pass before the people. Our Lord added, "Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink" (v 6a). Sure enough, in the sight of the elders, Moses struck the rock, and water came from the rock, and the people drank.

They had wondered, "Is the Lord among us or not?" And the answer was "yes!" Yes, the Lord truly was with His people.

What can **we** learn from this? Should we come down hard on the Israelites for being so hard-hearted? We **could**, but would **we** be any different? Is grumbling always bad? I suppose we could say that we are called upon to fear, love, and trust God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and that's all true. But trust can't be commanded, and it doesn't develop overnight.

Often times, big-hearted couples who have adopted abused or neglected children have the same story to tell, again and again. While the parents seek a full embrace, the child often comes around only by stages, learns to love, to trust, by stages, little by little. And it's amazing when you look at this story: God doesn't chastise His people. In the exodus, they knew the redemption and saving power of the Lord. In the paradise of springs and palm trees at Elim, they learned of a Lord who wanted, ultimately, to bring His people back to a paradise **greater** than Elim. But, in the meantime, there would be real hunger and thirst. And for that hunger and thirst, the Lord would rain down manna from heaven and bring forth living water from a rock. Yes, our Lord would provide for His people, and in doing so, He would show that He was the one who provided, that He was a Lord in whom they could put all their trust. In the desert, our Lord was building a relationship with His people, and He was patient. He was, as the psalmist says, slow to anger, but abounding in steadfast love.

And what does that mean for us? We would do well to expect hardships. We shouldn't be surprised when things go bad. So often, it's in the difficulties, in the tough times, that we remember our Lord and that we learn to rely on Him. In good times, we can become so content and happy that we easily lose sight that God is the giver of all good things. No food fills our stomach unless it has been given by our God, and no water quenches our thirst unless it comes from our good and gracious Lord.

But even more, these stories point us to a greater hunger and a greater thirst that only God can satisfy. Our Lord says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst." For what? For bread and water? No, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for **righteousness**" (Mt 5:6). Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

Apart from Christ, we're empty, with a hole, not in our stomach but in our heart. And we can fill it with all sorts of things, but we can only be truly satisfied with Christ, who is our bread of life, who is Himself the manna that God rains down to us from heaven. So it is, whenever we come to Communion, we eat the true and good manna; we taste the bread of life. The truth is life in this world is often a dreary desert. Sickness, death, and decay are all around us. But our Lord provides us with heavenly bread, which is His very flesh, given for the life of the world so that we might never

again hunger. So that we might be full and satisfied. So that, though we may die, yet shall we live.

And our Lord also provides for us living water. It is that same water that He provided to that Samaritan woman, that woman who had been divorced many times over. Now **there** was a woman who was thirsty, thirsty for something that the world could not provide. She tried to fill her life with men, hoping against hope that the next one would make her happy. But it wouldn't work. It couldn't work. Nothing can fill our ultimate longing but **the** Man, Jesus Christ Himself. St. Paul speaks about the rock in the wilderness, and he says that the rock was Christ Himself! He is our source of living water. He is the Lamb who was slain, from whom comes the river of life, in which our sins are washed away. He is the well, from which our deepest desires are at last fulfilled.

Like the Israelites, we're in the desert, and we've still got some wandering to do. We shouldn't be surprised to have hot days, hungry days, thirsty days. And maybe, along the way, we will grumble. But bring your grumbling and complaints to the Lord, knowing that He hears your pleas and answers your prayers. Maybe not always as we would like, maybe not as quickly as we'd want. Like the Israelites, we may very well ask, "Is the Lord among us or not?" And the answer is a resounding "Yes!" And He will never leave us. With **that**, we can be satisfied. And **because** of that we can truly, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!" Amen.