

Troubled Waters

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[0 : 00] You know, some Scriptures and passages in Scripture are really intended to be soothing, to calm our nerves, to ease our fears and anxieties, to reassure us of things that we need to hold on to.

Other passages in Scripture act more like smelling salts. They're meant to be abrasive. They're meant to wake us up. They're meant to grab our attention. They're meant to, in some cases, force us to focus on things that we might otherwise overlook. And this summer, we've been looking at Psalm 106, stanza by stanza, and Psalm 106 is full of smelling salts.

It is a song that was written primarily to recount some of the most heartbreaking, embarrassing failures perpetrated by the people of Israel during their time wandering in the wilderness. It recounts their biggest failures. And you might hear that and wonder, why would somebody want to write a song about anything like this? And the answer is, as the saying goes, those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.

[1 : 21] And so, God's people said, these are important, and we need to remind every future generation so that they can learn from our mistakes.

Psalm 106 is here to wake us up like smelling salts, to remind us of these things, and to help us learn from their mistakes.

Why us? Because we are living in the wilderness of the late modern West. We're still in the wilderness. And these lessons are as important to us as they were to God's people back then. Whether you're here as somebody who follows Jesus or you're curious and want to know more, not sure what you believe, there is something in here for all of us. And so, we're going to be looking specifically at an episode that we read about in verses 32 and 33.

This is a heartbreaking episode in Israel's past. And we read more about this episode in detail in Numbers chapter 20, verses 2 to 13.

[2 : 18] So, we're going to look at this story in three parts. There's a stubborn craving, a heartbreaking failure, and then a gracious God. Let's pray. Lord, we need both from you.

There are those of us here who desperately need your comfort. We need to be soothed, and I pray that through your Spirit you would do that. There are also many here who need to be awakened. We need to have our attention recaptured. Lord, we need you to direct our minds and hearts where you would have us go.

We pray that, Lord, you would do both, that you would give us comfort where we need comfort, where we feel afflicted. And for those of us who have become complacent or sleepy, I pray that you would shake us awake.

And I pray that both would be an act of your grace and love to draw us more closely to yourself through your Word. We pray this in your Son's holy name. Amen. So, first of all, a stubborn craving.

[3 : 20] In Numbers 20, verses 1 and 2, and in the preceding chapter, we learn that by this point, God's people are encamped at Kadesh. And this is now mostly the next generation.

So, these are people who have more than likely been born in the wilderness. They've been in the wilderness for a while at this point. And verse 2 tells us that they have encountered a problem here at Kadesh.

They're completely out of water. They're dying of thirst. And by the way, this isn't the first time that this has happened. This also happened earlier on their journey at Rephidim. You read about that in Exodus chapter 17.

And there, when they were out of water, they grumbled. And God miraculously provided for them by making water come right out of a rock. And so, you would think that they would be looking at their

present crisis.

We're out of water again. We're in the wilderness. God provided for us back then. Surely, God will provide for us again. And so, you would think they would fall to their knees and they would pray, God, please bring water for us again.

[4 : 24] But look what they do instead. It says in verse 3, And I hope you pick up the note of melodrama there.

You know, we're going to die, right? Worst case scenario, think of the cattle, you know, right? So, this is very melodramatic. Instead of praying, they're wallowing in self-pity, right?

This is classic self-pity. And then look what they say. Here's what we want to key in on. Verse 5, And why have you made us come up out of Egypt to bring us to this evil place?

They're accusing Moses of forcing them to come out of Egypt. Egypt was the place where they had been slaves.

For 400 years, they had been slaves in Egypt. And God, through Moses, had miraculously delivered them from slavery.

[5 : 36] He had demonstrated His power over Pharaoh and the Egyptian gods. He had set them free. Time and time again, when God speaks to His people, He introduces Himself as, I am the Lord your God, the one who brought you up out of slavery in Egypt.

So, this is the great demonstration of God's goodness and power. But they have it backwards. In their minds, Egypt, that was the good life.

That's where we had plenty to eat, plenty to drink. We were provided for. Life was good. The good old days. That kind of golden vision of a utopian past.

But you've brought us out here to this evil place to die. So, not only are they calling the wilderness evil, but they're calling Moses evil. And ultimately, they're calling God evil. And this isn't the first time they've said this.

Remember, they said this very same thing right after they came out of Egypt. Why have you brought us here to die? Can't we go back to Egypt? And then, fast forward to the end of their journey at the borders of the promised land.

[6 : 44] They're still saying it. Why can't we go back to Egypt? The point is this. God's people have come out of Egypt, but Egypt has not come out of them.

In their hearts, in their hearts, they're still slaves in Egypt. In their hearts, Pharaoh, who's long gone by this point, still has a firm grip on their identity.

Their identity hasn't changed. Now, you ask, well, what does this have to do with us? This is a long time ago. In John chapter 8, Jesus is speaking with some people.

And these are new converts. These are a bunch of Jews who have just recently decided that they like what Jesus has to say, and they want to follow him. And so, Jesus is teaching them.

And he says, if you listen to my words, and if you live by my words, if you abide in my teaching, the truth will set you free. If you listen to and live out my words, then you will become free.

[7 : 52] And they respond with confusion, and they say, what are you talking about? We are free. We've never been slaves to anyone. And Jesus responds, truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.

Right? The Bible says that just like the people of Israel were born into slavery in Egypt, so all human beings are born into slavery to sin.

And most people in the late modern West hearing that would say, what are you talking about? I'm free. I live in the freest country in the world. I've never been a slave to anybody. But what Jesus is saying is if you commit sin, it means that you're a slave to sin.

So, what that means is look at your life. Put it this way. Look at your life and think of this. Anything that you cannot say no to is your master.

Anything that you cannot say no to has enslaved you. If you can't stop overeating, then you're a slave to food.

[8 : 59] If you can't stop losing your temper, yelling at your girlfriend, boyfriend, husband, wife, kids, you're a slave to your anger.

If you can't stop conforming to what other people expect of you, if you can't ever say no and set boundaries even when you really want to, and you end up saying yes and then resenting the person that you said yes to, then you're a slave to the approval of other people.

All right? If you can't stop overworking such that you neglect your health, your family, your friends, then you're a slave to your career.

If you can't stop comparing your life to other people's lives, if you can't stop envying the lives that other people have, if you can't stop resenting your friends when they experience success, then you're a slave to covetousness.

If you habitually refuse to allow yourself to be put out in order to help somebody in need, then you're a slave to convenience, right?

[10:13] So if you begin to look at your life, you begin to realize there are things that I can't say no to. Now, a lot of people don't realize that because we don't say no a whole lot in our lives to things that we should say no to.

I've realized that in the last years I've really tried to change my eating habits as a result of just recognizing the impact of bad eating over decades on my body and my heart disease and genetic condition of high cholesterol that I've inherited.

I've really been trying to change my eating habits and saying no in ways that I've not said no before. And it's a simple thing, eating, it's a simple thing. And yet I've realized how much of a power food has over me and how hard it is to say no.

And you begin to look at your life and only when you start to say no do you really begin to realize, oh my goodness, I have so little power in this relationship. And you begin to realize I'm more of a slave than I think.

And here's the thing for those of us in the room who are Christians, this doesn't automatically change when you become a Christian. It doesn't automatically go away. Right? Jesus frees us from the penalty of sin, praise God.

[11:23] But the power of sin remains. The influence of sin remains until Jesus comes again. You know, there's a song by Sarah Groves that says, I've been painting pictures of Egypt, leaving out what it lacked.

The future seems so hard and I want to go back. And I was really captured by that image, painting pictures of Egypt, idealizing life apart from God, idealizing your life before you met God, idealizing life if you were to leave God behind, convincing yourself that God's way is simply not worth it, that God's way is maybe even evil, and that we would be way better off, our lives would be way better off without God in the picture.

Now, why would we think this way? And I think the answer is simply, for those of us who are followers of Jesus, because the path of freedom is hard.

It's hard. It takes more effort than slavery. And that's a bit of a paradox. And yet, we find that again and again to be true, that the road back to Egypt and life in Egypt is easier in a lot of ways.

You know, God calls us to the freedom of self-control. But it's much easier to overeat or to drink too much because it helps us escape for a bit.

[13:03] You know, when you are feeling acute distress, your system isn't thinking on a moral level. It's just simply thinking, what can I do to reduce the distress as quickly as possible?

And if you have trained yourself that eating or drinking will reduce it quickly, it will get you numb, and that's better than how you feel now, then that's what you're going to do.

It's much easier to go back to the same old patterns. God calls us to the freedom of forgiveness. But it is much easier to hold on to bitterness.

It's much easier, and it feels good. It feels good to have a kind of righteous indignation towards somebody. God calls us to the freedom of Sabbath rest, but it is much easier to chase productivity and success.

Again, a bit paradoxical. It's much easier to do that because our society rewards that kind of thing. So again and again and again, you see that God calls us to freedom, but there's a cost.

[14:09] There's an effort involved in that. It's much harder in most cases than going back to Egypt. And what we see consistently in Scripture is that God's desire is to set us free, and it is to lead us into a lifetime of freedom.

But until Jesus comes again, we're going to be haunted by a stubborn craving for Egypt. We're going to be haunted by this temptation to paint pictures of the good life apart from God.

So you ask, okay, well, what can we do about it? That's the passage sort of sets up this problem, and then we're hanging in the tension of, okay, where's this going to go from here? And so we look to Moses.

Moses is the leader. Aaron, they're the leaders. Okay, what are they going to do? So Moses and Aaron, they go to the Lord. They fall on their face at the tent of meeting, and they cry out to God. And God says this to Moses.

He says, I want you to take up your staff, which is a symbol of authority, and I want you to go out in front of all of the people, and I want you to speak to the rock. Just go to the rock right here and speak to the rock, and water's going to come gushing out of it.

[15 : 16] But Moses is tired, and he's frustrated, and he's angry because the people are so stubborn and so critical.

And so he makes a thoughtless and yet terrible mistake. Verses 10 and 11. Moses doesn't say, God, bring water out of this rock.

He says to the people, shall we bring water out of this rock for you? It's a little mistake in terms of the actual wording, but it's a massive mistake in terms of the theology.

God says, speak to the rock, and I will make water come out of it. And then Moses says, shall we bring water out of this rock for you? We'll do it, not God. And then instead of speaking to the rock, he strikes it twice with his staff.

And you can imagine him almost doing it in frustration, like, all right, let's get this show on the road. Whack, whack. Now, some people read this, actually many of us read this, and we say, well, what's the big deal?

[16 : 20] Why does God get so angry at just a little grammatical mistake? You know, my old seminary professor, Walt Kaiser, was an Old Testament scholar, and he actually says that the issue here is that it's all about God's Word.

It's all about God's Word. What he says is this. He says, what the people lacked at this particular moment is not so much water. They lacked confidence in God's Word.

Their fear over the water was actually rooted in a deeper fear that God's promise to provide for them was a lie. They had no confidence in God's Word.

And so here's what God is saying. Moses, I want you to say my Word. I want you to get up in front of these people, and I want you to speak my Word over the rock. And then they're going to see water gush out.

And what's going to be the impact of that on their hearts? I can trust God's Word. When I speak God's Word, when other people speak God's Word, things happen. This is the Word that brought creation into existence.

[17 : 23] This is the Word that flung the stars into the sky. This is the Word that created human beings. This is the Word that can make water come out of rocks. That's what I want you to do, Moses.

And so in that little shift when Moses says, shall we bring water out of the rock, he is undercutting God's Word. He's not speaking it as it was given to him.

And by the way, for those of us who are teachers and preachers of God's Word in any capacity, there's a little side application for us. You know, when we speak God's Word, do we simply speak it as it has been given to us with confidence that God is going to move in the hearts of his people? Or do we feel the need to edit it, apologize for it, explain it away, and ultimately undercut people's confidence in its power? Right, so this is Moses' mistake.

He undercuts people's confidence rather than holding God's Word out and showing them what it's capable of. And so you ask, well, okay, well, this feels like a different point. What does this have to do with slavery and freedom, which we've just been talking about?

[18 : 35] And here's the connection. The key to true freedom is confidence in God's Word. How do you get Egypt out of people?

You've gotten them out of Egypt, but how do you get Egypt out of them? How do you turn their hearts from being slave hearts into free hearts? It's confidence in God's Word. It's confidence that God is going to do what he says he's going to do.

And what you find in your life is this. The less we trust God's Word and the less we trust that God is true to his Word, the more tempted we are to paint pictures of Egypt in our minds.

It's a direct correlation. So what God wanted to do was to show his people that they could trust his Word. But Moses, because of his frustration and anger and all the things we said, he's not thinking straight.

He fails to speak and follow God's Word. And for that, God tells him that he's not going to be allowed to enter into the Promised Land. Now, this is really harsh. Seems really harsh to our ears. [19 : 43] But here's the lesson I think we need to learn from this. Here's the lesson. Moses represents humanity's best chance at freedom. Right? I mean, in terms of people, in terms of leaders, Moses is about as good as it gets.

Moses has actually heard the audible voice of God. Moses has seen the face of God. Moses has devoted his life to leading these people from slavery to freedom.

It's his life's work. If Moses, here at the very last minute, the 11th hour, if Moses fails, I think that we're meant to ask, well, what chance do I have?

And really, what chance does any human leader have to save us and lead us into true freedom? I think that we are meant to feel the futility of human beings trying to save ourselves.

If Moses can't do it, I've got no chance of doing it in my own life. So this is where we find ourselves in this passage.

[20 : 57] If all human beings are born slaves to sin, and if even after we're forgiven through Jesus, we continue to crave Egypt because we don't trust God's word, and if we can't save ourselves, then what hope is there?

And then we turn to this image of a gracious God. And you say, well, where's the grace of God in this passage? He just told Moses that he's not going to be allowed to enter the promised land. But along with the discipline of the Lord, we see the grace of the Lord. Even though the people accuse God of being evil, even though they accuse God of leading them into the wilderness only to kill them, even though they are saying blatantly that they long to return to Egypt, even though Moses fails to speak and uphold God's word as he had received it, even in the face of all of these failure after failure after failure, verse 11, water came out abundantly.

The water still comes out of the rock, and the congregation drinks until they are full. And what we need to recognize this as is an act of sheer grace.

They don't deserve for the water to come out. This is pure grace. And the good news for us, reading this thousands of years later, is that God has done something even greater in our lives.

[22 : 26] 1 Corinthians 10, Paul says, for I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea. He's talking about the Exodus. All were baptized into Moses and the cloud and the sea.

He's talking about the wilderness wandering. And all ate the same spiritual food. He's talking about the manna. And all drank the same spiritual drink. He's talking about the water that came out of the rocks.

For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ. It is amazing when the Bible is willing to interpret itself so that we don't miss what it's trying to say to us.

And Paul is looking back at these moments in Israel's history, perhaps even reading back through Psalm 106, and he's looking back on this history when even though these people didn't deserve it, God miraculously provided for them by bringing water out of the rocks.

And Paul is saying, all along, that was Christ. That was Jesus all along because that's who Christ is. Christ is the water in the desert for those who are dying of thirst.

[23 : 42] Christ is God's great gift to the world. Christ is God's Word who came in fulfillment of God's Word. Right? It's no wonder in John chapter 4, Jesus says to the woman at the well, we heard this read a moment ago, he says to this woman, if you knew the gift of God and who it is that is speaking with you, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.

Whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.

Why did Moses fail? Because Moses said, I will give you water. But guess what? No human being can say, I will give you water.

Only God can say, I will give you water. Only Jesus Christ can say, I will give you water. But it's not just the water that will leave you thirsty.

In a few hours, it is living water. And more than that, I will, like I brought the water out of the rock, I'm going to bring water out of your heart. There's going to be a spring of living water in you and you will never be thirsty again.

[25 : 00] Imagine if Moses had said something like that to the people in the wilderness. This promise is so much greater, it makes that promise look like a shadow by comparison. And of

course, Jesus isn't just talking about water, he's talking about grace.

He's talking about the fact that even when we crave Egypt, even when we fail to uphold God's word, even when we fall back into sin, God continues to pour his love and his grace and himself into our lives.

And I want to be very clear about this image. It's very easy to read Numbers chapter 20 and to imagine a little rock and to imagine a little trickle of water coming out of the rock.

That's what I've always imagined when I think of this incident. I read about someone who actually tried to calculate how much water would have to come out to be able to supply roughly 2 million people and probably another million cattle.

Now for the sake of comparison, your kitchen faucet has a flow rate of probably something around one gallon per minute. That's probably the flow rate. But here at Kadesh, this person estimated that this water had to come out at a rate of about 2,000 gallons per second.

[26 : 23] So don't imagine a little trickle of water bubbling out of a little rock on the side of the hill. Imagine a hydroelectric dam opening its floodgates and this massive jet of water coming out like a fountain.

And you say, well, okay, we're kind of getting into the weeds here a little bit. Why does this matter so much? Because I think that we imagine God's grace in the same way. I think that we have a tendency to imagine God's grace as this little trickle.

As though God has an eyedropper of grace and he's very stingy with it and only when we really need it then he's like drip, drip and he gives us a little bit of grace but just enough. And that is a very wrong-minded way to think about grace.

That's not how God's grace works. When we need grace, God doesn't just give us a few drops. He opens the floodgates.

He pours his grace like a great fountain into our lives. Right? So as we think about that image and just hold that image in your mind, I kind of want to bring all of this together and I want to ask this kind of, you know, \$64,000 question.

[27 : 39] How do we overcome that craving for Egypt and how do we stop painting pictures of Egypt in our minds? How do we become truly free? And I think that there are some very practical implications from Numbers 20 that we can take away this morning.

The first is this. Focus on remembering times in the past when God has provided for you.

Remember times in the past when God has provided for you.

Israel failed to do this. You know, God had just done this amazing thing with water and rocks and they completely forgot it. They're in the same exact predicament.

No memory of it. Right? So if you're struggling and it doesn't seem like God is answering your prayer in the present, spend time remembering times in your past when God has provided for you. And consider keeping a journal so that when God does provide, when good things happen and you say, wow, God really came through, you take a moment to write that down so that in the future when you're struggling and you're thirsty in the wilderness, you can open that journal and go back and remember, here's all of the times.

[28 : 54] Here's the examples that I have that God is true to His Word. That's the first thing.

Remember times in the past when God has provided for you. Number two, reject the temptation to self-pity and instead pour that energy into prayer.

Self-pity is going to wear you out. Self-pity, the kind of woe is me, focusing on the negative, feeling sorry for yourself, blaming everybody for your problems. It feels good, but ultimately it's going to suck you dry and it wears the people around you out as well.

Instead of helping you make progress, it actually leaves you more depressed and hopeless. So use that energy to pray instead. And if you want a good guide, how do I pray when I'm in the wilderness and I'm thirsty and I'm hungry and I feel like God is absent?

The Psalms are full of prayers. So look at the Psalms. They'll teach you how to pray those kinds of prayers when you're desperate. And then number three, recognize that even when we do fall into sin, God continues to pour grace into our lives.

On the cross, Jesus Christ opened the floodgates. He opened the floodgates. And they're still open.

[30 : 12] And they're pouring grace into the world. And the invitation from Jesus is to come all who are thirsty and drink. Right?

So every time we fail, every time we fall short, every time we fail to uphold God's word, every time we want to go back to Egypt, every time we find ourselves on the road headed back, we have only to come to the cross in repentance and to drink our fill.

And what happens is that slave heart that we have will taste that water and it will taste that water and it will taste that water. And over time, your heart will change.

And it will learn how to be free. It will learn how to trust the word of God. It will learn how to follow Jesus in faith and repentance. It will learn how to move toward the true promised land of the new creation.

It will learn that the promise of happiness in Egypt is an empty promise. And it will learn that our thirst can only be satisfied by the living water that Jesus offers the world.

[31 : 17] Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word. We thank you for your grace. And everybody in this room, Lord, in all different ways, we all need that floodgate.

Lord, we all need it in our lives. And I pray that even as we're gathered here, we would feel its effects. Lord, as we come in a little while together in prayer, that we would feel your love for us. As we come around your table and as we eat the bread and drink the wine, we would see these as the manna, Lord, in the wilderness. We would see the water that comes out of the rock, Lord, that we would drink abundantly from your grace, Lord.

And we pray that in doing so, you would set us free, Lord. And we pray all of this that we would glorify you as people that you have freed. And we pray this for our good and that the city and the world might know where true freedom can be found.

We pray this in your son's holy name. Amen.