

Four Stages in the Life of the Lord's People

Reading: Exodus 14.

It is our thought to begin with the end of this chapter, and go on to the end of the book. What is in view as illustrated by the book of Exodus is the stages of the life of the Lord's people. We shall suggest four stages in the progress of the life of the people of the Lord, as seen from the end of chapter 14 onwards. We shall draw very simple lessons from the Word here, leaving out a very great deal; perhaps only noting one thing about each of these four stages.

1. The Red Sea to Sinai

Without dealing with any of the detail, we notice that the first stage, from the Red Sea to Sinai, was peculiarly marked by a series of needs arising, and needs being wonderfully met.

The first need was that of deliverance from a pursuing enemy, and with the end of chapter 14 you have the pursuing Egyptians overwhelmed in the Sea leading to the great song of redemption on the part of God's people.

Then there are other various needs arising. The bitter waters; the experience of bitterness, so early coming into the experience of the people of God, changed in a marvellous way, and very swiftly, to sweetness. It seems that, no sooner had they tasted of bitterness, the bitterness was changed to sweetness. It was not a long-drawn-out experience; it was but a taste of bitterness, and then wonderfully and instantly the bitterness changed for sweetness.

The next thing was hunger; and immediately God provided the Manna.

Then thirst again; thirst of a deeper kind; thirst of a more enduring character. The waters of Marah represent just a temporary experience, but now they have come to the serious situation that water is essential to life, without which there is no living, and again, wonderfully and instantly, water is given from the smitten rock.

Instantly Amalek comes out to withstand progress, and the first experience of an active enemy, an active adversary to spiritual progress, is entered into. Again marvellously Amalek is overthrown and routed out, and the people are delivered.

So you have a series of acute needs arising, and an almost instant stepping in of God in a wonderful way to meet those needs. It represents a clearly defined phase and period of spiritual life, and it is the first phase. How true to history this is. Have not most of us had this experience, that when we were first brought to the Lord, the Lord marked that stage of our Christian life by wonderful answers to prayer, wonderful responses, where it seemed that a need arose and the Lord was at hand. We only had to turn to Him, and He was there. The first stage of the Christian life was full of romance, full of wonder, all so clearly marked by the grace of God.

That has been the experience of so many. It is that experience which led a certain hymn writer to pen a familiar hymn:

"Where is the blessedness I knew when first I saw the Lord?
Where is the soul-refreshing view of Jesus and His word?"

It is a reflection upon an experience at the beginning of the Christian life which has now disappeared, and a longing to have that wonderful time all over again. It is just the first stage, and it is marked by swift, wonderful, amazing touches of the hand of God. There

was a balance being kept by the Lord, so clearly that the lesson was hardly discernible. What it was the Lord was seeking to teach and lay down as a foundation thing for life by that means, was not very thoroughly learned. Afterwards perhaps we pick it up and see it, but not always at the time.

What does this period, this phase, from the Red Sea to Sinai mean? The Lord is saying, on the one hand, by permitting these experiences to arise, these difficulties, these needs to come about, I want you to come to see that this earth has nothing for you but bitterness, dissatisfaction and heart-hunger; this earth can never bring the deep, settled satisfaction of God's own life to the believer. The believer has come out into a realm where this earth can no longer satisfy. This earth is a place of unsatisfied longings, of conflict and adversity, of bitterness and sorrow, when once you have come out to be the Lord's. Now it is the Lord Himself Who is your satisfaction. You will find that, while here there is a state of bitterness, knowing the Lord means that in the midst of the bitterness there can be sweetness. Here there may be starvation, but the Lord can be your sustenance, your provision. Here there may be a deep-seated longing for life. The Lord only is your life. This earth can do nothing. Here there is conflict, an adversary, but the Lord is your victory in conflict.

It is a very simple lesson, but that is the balance which the Lord keeps so marvellously in this first stage, and it is just marked by that instant grace of God, seeking to teach the lesson that now the Lord has brought you out to Himself, and you will discover as never before how needy you are, and what the real situation is here in this earth. But you will also discover what the Lord can be to His own. And so, in the first stage of the spiritual life from above, it seems as though the Lord is more to you than He ever is afterwards. That is, there is a way in which you see it as you may not see it afterwards. Although the reality becomes very much deeper afterward, you just do not see it.

It is like the blossom on the trees in spring. The blossom is so beautiful, it is all so wonderful to look at, you just feast your eyes upon it. And then the winds of March come, and all the blossom goes, and you say: "Where is the blessedness I knew ...?" Well, the blossom has got to go before you can get the fruit, and when the fruit comes later you say: The blossom was very beautiful, I enjoyed it, the blossom days were great days, but I think things have gone deeper now. You will not live so much on the surface, you are getting the inner fruit; but it is a real experience of the spiritual life. It seems so often that the Lord deals with you and me on the outside of things in spiritual infancy. It is marked by the grace which is seeking to show that the earth can give no satisfaction, and the Lord Himself has determined to be the satisfaction of those who have come out from the world to be His own.

2. The Erection of the Tabernacle

The second stage is at Sinai, and especially connected with the tabernacle. Here at Sinai a revelation has been given of God's House, God's thought concerning His people, that they are to be not just a congregation but a family, not just a crowd but an ordered spiritual household. That revelation comes, and then the Lord calls all of them into fellowship and cooperation with Himself in constituting that. So that at Sinai you find all the people are called into fellowship and cooperation to provide the wherewithal for God's House, for the tabernacle. This thing has been laid upon them, and they go back to their tents to see what they can discover there in their own lives which can contribute towards this full thought of God for His House. Now the question is not just one of knowing how to live the Christian life, and finding that the Lord answers your prayers when you are in need. That is the infant stage. Now the question is one of cooperation with God in service. So they came to have a taste of the blessings of service, and the Lord blessed them in that work for Him. They were, the Word says again and again: "... *of a willing heart*", and they were having such a good time in the work of the Lord that at length they had brought more than enough, and they had to be restrained. The atmosphere is

one of having great joy in the work of the Lord, in working together with God concerning His House. It is a taste of what it means to be in fellowship with God in a great purpose, a great work, a great divine thought, and to be in that and to know the joy of that.

3. Wandering in the Wilderness

Then there comes a third stage. That stage is from Sinai through the years of wandering in the wilderness, whether it be actually or literally a long period or not, when you are in it, if it is only a day or two, it seems the longest. The very nature of it gives it a sense of eternity. The very meaning of it seems to make it never ending. What is the meaning of this third stage? (Mark you, it is progress. It does not seem like it, but it is a phase of the progress, unfortunately necessary). What is it? It is the period in which all that God cannot accept in His people is being brought out to the light. It is as though God had said: You are Mine; I am with you; I am wanting to be your all; and I want to have you in the full, joyous fellowship with Me in My purpose. *But*, having given you a taste of that, having won your hearts for that, having given you a vision of that, having allowed you just to have some little experience of that, it is now necessary for me to show you that to live in all the deep meaning of that continuously, there is something to be done. It is not living in the emotional, external, superficial pleasure of it, but the deep meaning of it, which deeper than emotion. Then there is something to be done by way of getting rid of all that which belongs to you by nature. It will not do to take up the blessings of God in the flesh; it will not do to take up the work of God in the flesh. To get rid of the flesh God must expose the flesh to us, let us know what our own flesh is like. And so there comes that period which seems to be the longest of all, in which we are discovering that, after all, there is such a lot of evil in our own hearts, and a lot of that which is contrary to God. The fact that the Lord has blessed does not mean that the Lord now is not willing to bless and will not bless, either in spiritual experience between ourselves and the Lord, or in service, but it means that the Lord is seeking to make a way whereby all His purpose and thought for us can have the deepest root in us.

It is equally true in experience that when people begin to take hold of the blessings of the Lord, the answers to prayer that the Lord has given, and rejoice in them in the flesh and make a great thing of them, as though they were *the* supreme things, or when they begin to take hold of the work of the Lord and the success of the work of the Lord, and make everything of the success, counting heads and so on, it is not long before the spiritual life shows itself to be very shallow. The disciples were in danger of something like that when they came back from their first taste of the work of the Lord apart from Him. They said: "*Even the demons are subject unto us.*" This is a natural rejoicing in the blessings of the Lord, and the Lord said: "*... rejoice not, that the spirits are subject unto you ...*". In other words He was saying: Do not make a great deal of the success of your work; your glorying must be that your names are written in heaven.

The Lord has to take this third step with His people, in which He uncovers the depths of the human heart, even of His own. This is not to bring them under condemnation, because they are in Christ, and there is no condemnation, but to bring them to the place where they will recognise what that Red Sea meant. It also brings them to the counterpart of the Red Sea, the Jordan, the whole of the old man. The Red Sea is the judgement side of things. The Jordan represents the resurrection side of things. There is no hope in the Red Sea, but there is hope in Jordan. Jordan is something in which there is a work wrought which represents something more than the judgement of our sins. It represents our coming through to resurrection union with the Lord Jesus. In Israel's case there were forty years between the two, but in spiritual experience these two things are brought right up together, and you recognise that they are only two sides of one thing. One is judgement and death, as having been wrought by God. The other is your faith acceptance of that, to come out into a place of life.

The third stage is a very difficult, and trying, and sometimes seems a very long-drawn-out stage, and we are discovering that, although we are gloriously saved, in ourselves, that is, in our flesh, dwells no good thing. No man had a more glorious conversion than Paul, and perhaps few men, if any, had any more terrible exposure of the worthlessness of themselves after their conversion than Paul.

Do you notice where that third stage ends? It ends with the uplifted serpent in the wilderness. That is very significant when you move to John's Gospel, chapter 3. You remember that Nicodemus — a very religious man, a very upright man, so far as the law of Sinai was concerned — had been living under the regime of Sinai for a long time, perhaps all his life, and then the Lord said to Nicodemus: "*As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness ...*", and He was saying, in effect: Nicodemus, you have come to Sinai, but you will have to come to Calvary, to the place where all the curse is wrought out, even in the case of a religious man, for there is no good even in the religious flesh. The third stage of exposing of the flesh, even in a saved people, ended with the serpent lifted up, and that is very significant. A very important part of our Christian life is the coming to know that, in our flesh, even as Christians, as Christian workers, dwells no good thing. We shall never come to Jordan, and never come through to the land, until we have come there.

Do not feel discouraged. Do not feel that everything has gone wrong when the Lord begins to do that. So many, when the Lord begins to expose the worthlessness of their own life, even as children of God, begin to feel, or allow the enemy to suggest, that after all they are not saved at all; everything has gone wrong and the Lord is against them. The Lord is not against you, but He is against your flesh all the way through. We have to bring our flesh to the place where, having seen that there is *no good in it*, it is repudiated. Then we shall come to the place of the fourth stage.

4. Definite, Final Movement towards the Land

This is the stage where, Jordan having seen the voluntary laying aside of the exposed flesh, we go over into the land. It is not until we get a taste of the land, begin to know something of what spiritual life is. We have to know something of what it means to have the Lord working by us, and not our working for the Lord; to know what it is to have the Lord in command of things; to know what victory is; and to become partakers of more of the real fulness of Christ. We should be able to value our past history since we came out of Egypt. When we come into the land we see the wilderness in quite a different light. While we were in the wilderness, all we were able to think of was discipline, judgement, being emptied, broken, poured out. we wondered what God was after. There was a battle even to believe that the Lord was interested in us at all. Now we get through, and begin to taste of possessions, of Christ, the land, and we can look back and say it was all right. That was necessary unto this. We should never have come to this position, this spiritual wealth, this spiritual knowledge and understanding if the Lord had not dealt with us as He did deal with us in the breaking and the emptying. We are able to appreciate it when we get there, but not before.

You know quite well your most cherished possession is a deep, real, inward spiritual knowledge of the Lord, it is something deeper than thought, emotion, argument or words. You have come to possess the Lord. You have a life between yourself and the Lord which is a very real life. It does not mean that now you can explain everything, interpret everything, but you know the Lord. People may ask you for an explanation, and you will have to say: I cannot explain it, I cannot put it into words, I cannot argue it out, but I know, and this that I have of the Lord inwardly is more to me than anything else. I know the meaning now of an opened heaven. I know what it is to have spiritual revelation of God through His Word. I am learning more and more of the fulness of Christ. You know that is more to you than anything in this universe, and you know, as well as you know that you have a being, that that was never possible until the Lord

brought you to Jordan, and broke you, smashed you, emptied you, poured you out, and you said: Oh, yes I understand that wilderness! I know it was quite right!

It is another stage of things, in the light of which you understand the difficult times through which you went in the leading of God. Now you are moving to the land. You have not compassed all the land yet, but you are moving on.

In which stage should we put ourselves? It may be some are in the present enjoyment of the initial blessings of the Christian life, and their danger is to say: You people may talk about a lot of wonderful, deep things and I do not know what you are talking about; I am perfectly satisfied with what I have. We rejoice in all that you are enjoying of the Lord, as in the first stage of the spiritual life. We would not discourage you for a moment by saying that the blossom will blow off sooner or later, but we want to tell you that there are stages.

It may be that some are in the second stage, and they are knowing blessing in the service of the Lord. They know a great joy in seeing what the Lord is after, and being actively at work with Him in it. This experience is not marked too much by difficulty. It is a good stage to be in, but it is inevitable that sooner or later you will pass into the third stage.

This is where the Lord begins to show you old Adam still in you, and that that old Adam has first to be recognised before it can be repudiated. And then sooner or later you come to Jordan, quite willingly, and say: Jordan is a very necessary thing for me; I must die; there is nothing for me but to die. When you come there, and accept death in union with Christ, you are in a very hopeful place. Death is not despair when it is recognised in that realm. When the Lord Jesus died He took our old man away, and made a way whereby you and I can go out, and Christ becomes the new Man — all the Lord Jesus. It may be, then, that some are at the third stage, having a bad time of exposing, breaking, emptying, and you are wondering if there will be anything left. You are wondering if all the joy of service is gone, and all the real joy of spiritual life has disappeared for ever. It is an important, necessary phase.

There is something beyond that, and the day will come when you will begin to taste of the positive side, and you will say: Now I understand why it was I went through that darkness; it was necessary; it has led to this. The fourth stage is that of beginning to know that heavenly life with the Lord Jesus. It is only a beginning, for it goes on for all eternity. There is no end to that stage. It begins here, and goes on hereafter, and you will discover as you go on more and more of the riches of Christ.

This word is just to help you to recognise the movements of the life of the child of God from one stage to another, to perhaps interpret your own experience and encourage you to go on to God's full end. The Lord help us all to do so.