

# The Washing of the Word - From the Episode of Moses Striking the Rock

by Art Katz

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*The sermon emphasizes the importance of purification and the provision of God for death, highlighting the need for clean water and living water to wash away corruption and defilement, and encouraging speakers to trust solely in God to convey the living water of God.*

**Scripture:** Numbers 19:11

**Topics:** "The Word of God", "Purification"

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## Description

Art Katz emphasizes the significance of being cleansed by the 'washing of the Word' through the biblical account of Moses striking the rock. He draws parallels between the Old Testament laws of purification and the necessity for believers to be continually washed by the living water of God's Word to avoid bringing corruption into the sanctuary. Katz warns against the dangers of spiritual death manifested in strife, contention, and a lack of reverence for God's sovereignty in our circumstances. He urges preachers and believers alike to seek God's presence earnestly, recognizing that every word spoken should convey the life of God, lest they inadvertently communicate death. Ultimately, Katz calls for a deeper commitment to purity and obedience in our relationship with God, as exemplified by Moses and Aaron's experience.

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## Transcript

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A transcription of a spoken message - 2004

He that toucheth the dead body of any man shall be unclean seven days: the same shall purify himself therewith on the third day, and on the seventh day he shall be clean: but if he purify not himself the third day, then the seventh day he shall not be clean. Whosoever toucheth a dead person, the body of a man that hath died, and purifieth not himself, defileth the tabernacle of Jehovah; and that soul shall be cut off from Israel: because the water for impurity was not sprinkled upon him, he shall be unclean; his uncleanness is yet upon him. This is the law when a man dieth in a tent or a tabernacle, [the margin says,

'in a dwelling or a house']: every one that cometh into the tent, and every one that is in the tent, shall be unclean seven days (Numbers 19:11-14).

It is a strange text, and one that I have not ever considered before. I don't know how it's applicable to us but I'd rather take the risk of sharing it than to withhold it and find out later that we omitted something that the Lord wanted to employ. The text is so out of our present context, so altogether Old Testament-ish, that you wonder whether there could be any kind of application or relevance at all.

Evidently, the subject of death was so foundational to the consideration of Israel. The text is full of trembling exhortations and requirements of stipulation, which, if violated, the sanctuary itself is defiled. It would not be just the home where the person who is unclean for the touching, or being even in the presence of the dead body, but the sanctuary, because that one will come into the sanctuary of the Lord and bring the corruption and taint of death with him into that place. Apparently, the only answer was the washing with water on the third day and on the seventh day.

Whoever in the open field touches one who has been killed by a sword or has died naturally, and whosoever in the open field toucheth one that is slain with a sword, or a dead body, or a bone of a man, or a grave, shall be unclean seven days (v. 16).

Even so much as a fragment, a dead bone, a knuckle, a joint, a jaw, a tooth is enough to communicate the corruption of death, the defilement of death. Even if it's inadvertent, even if you have stumbled upon it, still the corruption is communicated.

And for the unclean they shall take of the ashes of the burning of the sin-offering; and running water shall be put thereto in a vessel: and a clean person shall take hyssop, and dip it in the water, and sprinkle it upon the tent, and upon all the vessels, and upon the persons that were there, and upon him that touched the bone, or the slain, or the dead, or the grave: and the clean person shall sprinkle upon the unclean on the third day, and on the seventh day: and on the seventh day he shall purify him; and he shall wash his clothes, and bathe himself in water, and shall be clean at even. But the man that shall be unclean, and shall not purify himself, that soul shall be cut off from the midst of the assembly, because he hath defiled the sanctuary of Jehovah: the water for impurity hath not been sprinkled upon him; he is unclean. And it shall be a perpetual statute unto them: and he that sprinkleth the water for impurity shall wash his clothes, and he that toucheth the water for impurity shall be unclean until even. And whatsoever the unclean person toucheth shall be unclean; and the soul that toucheth it shall be unclean until evening (vv. 17-22).

Any contact or picking up of the resonance of death required purification through washing. Here the text says running waters, but the margin says living waters. Stagnant water cannot be used, it has got to be running; it has got to be living; it has got to have a vivacity and a life of its own; it has got to issue out from the throne of the Lord, out of the soil of the earth. You can't use water that has one time come from that source and has accumulated and remains [stagnant]. It has got to be fresh, flowing, living water.

We are not in the Levitical time and dispensation, but perhaps the application for us should be understood as a washing of the water of the word. If we are not being washed by the water of the word, we remain in our corruption and in our defilement. We bring that death into the very sanctuary of God. Could it be, for this reason, that death is more pervasive in the church than we know? The provision of God for any form of death is the dashing of water by one who is clean upon that one who has been tainted or corrupted. Who of us has not brought some measure of that corruption with us into our meetings?

Death does not only mean the morbid cessation of life where the pulse ceases. Death is any kind of restriction or cessation that is contrary to life and to its flow. Depression is a form of death. Fear, insecurity, self-consciousness--anything that restricts the life of God is death. I appreciate the English writer T. Austin Sparks, who after a lifetime of searching the word and being one of God's most commendable spokesmen, said that after a lifetime of being occupied with the issues of God, he had finally come to the conclusion that everything was a contest between life and death. Are we as sufficiently conscious of that conflict? Perhaps we would not give ourselves as readily as we do to the forms of death which we touch and handle and express.

The sanctuary becomes defiled. The answer and provision of God is clean water, running water, living water. What a remarkable responsibility, then, for us who are bearers of the Word to be more than correct, more than amusing, and more than instructive. Every word that proceeds from our mouth, no matter what the subject, should be the living water of the Lord that washes the hearer even as he is listening and receiving. If not, we will remain tainted and corrupted by death in the one form or the other.

Continuing into chapter 20, we read of the episode of Israel contending against God because they were dry and in a wilderness place:

And there was no water for the congregation: and they assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron. And the people strove [contended] with Moses... (v. 2).

Striving, in this sense, is a form of death. Contentions, argument, division, strife, resentment, bitterness, are all forms of death. Who of us is not susceptible to that taint and needs continually to be cleansed? Do we have access to the living water and are we appropriating that provision? Are our words coming out of a priestly place in God? Are we aware and jealous that our words convey the life of God to contend against the death that is everywhere seeking to penetrate and infiltrate and stupefy the church and to defile His sanctuary.

This is a new generation of Israelites as the first generation had already been wiped out.

And why have ye brought the assembly of Jehovah into this wilderness, that we should die there, we and our beasts? And wherefore have ye made us to come up out of Egypt, to bring us in unto this evil place? (vv. 4-5a).

If you want to invite death, just tell God that the place where He brought you is wretched. Tell Him that it doesn't please your sensibility, your taste, your cultural disposition; it's too rough or unrefined, or you don't like the place where He's brought you, and you tell Him that it's terrible and wretched. Let us not throw that attitude into the teeth of God. Is there any place where our foot comes that is not a statement of His sovereignty?

Are there any circumstances in our life that we have not recognized as being God who, by His sovereignty, has brought us there? However dry the appearance, however unbecoming, however unlovely, however formidable, it is still the place of God. In those places, He can perform His glories--all the more when it is a wilderness, all the more when it lacks ostensible beauty and things that are pleasing to the senses. But to call that place or circumstance wicked or vile is a statement of people who are already in death. Remember that these are a people who had already seen the carcasses of their forebears spread throughout the wilderness for just that kind of murmuring.

It is no place of seed, or of figs, or of vines, or of pomegranates; neither is there any water to drink. And Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly unto the door of the tent of meeting, and fell upon their faces: and the glory of Jehovah appeared unto them (vv. 5a-6).

Why we are not getting more living water from our messengers and bearers of the word than we presently are? Have we sought the Lord on our faces before Him in the tent of the assembly? This is different from studying and being diligent in comparing scripture with scripture, and scouring the concordance to make sure that our message is airtight and doctrinally sound. I am talking about seeking Him.

When Moses and Aaron heard this complaint, they knew that this people were inviting death again. It wasn't enough that the generation before them was wiped out and left as carcasses. They themselves were dangerously close to the same destiny. Moses did not want to speak out of his wisdom or experience, or some past usage of God. He knew he had to find God anew, because this was crisis; this was life and death, and only God could give an answer.

I am beginning to wonder if every speaking occasion is the issue of life and death. I am not sure there is any room for neutrality here. It is an issue of life or death, not just for us, but for those to whom our witness comes. If that witness is dull and inert, then we're communicating that death to others. The answer for us all--not just the preacher of the word--is to be on our faces before God. Before we commence the day, that must be our posture, or what will we communicate? Let us not assume that we can speak life without this posture before God afresh and anew. Let us not get caught up good service for others, but neglect this first priority. The good is the enemy of the perfect, and it's for that kind of mentality that we're not getting the living word that washes and purges and purifies and keeps the sanctuary of God undefiled.

Moses and Aaron are our examples. They fell on their faces, and the glory of the Lord appeared to them. Their act brought about the Lord's response. The glory of the Lord is the presence of God. No masters' degree in theology or whatever else we feel qualifies or equips us should be substituted here. The glory of the Lord will never appear, either to us, or to God's people through us unless we are on our faces before Him. Let us seek His face with a greater desperation and urgency--as if life and death were hanging in the balance, and only God can give answer. Can you imagine a whole church that believes that and lives like that? What a glorious church that would be!

And Jehovah spake unto Moses, saying, "Take the rod, and assemble the congregation, thou, and Aaron thy brother, and speak ye unto the rock before their eyes, that it give forth its water; and thou shalt bring forth to them water out of the rock; so thou shalt give the congregation and their cattle drink. And Moses took the rod from before Jehovah, as He commanded him" (vv. 7-9).

We will notice that Moses was obedient up to a certain point, but it was not a complete obedience, for which Moses would suffer an eternal embarrassment and shame. The Lord would not allow him to enter the land, because, though he was essentially obedient in the preliminary steps, he missed it in the final. We are called to a consistency of such an ultimate kind. And "Who is sufficient for these things?" Even though the water may gush out, in of the mercy of God, there is a penalty and a consequence for us who did not obey God exactly in what He required to meet that contingency.

And Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said unto them, "Hear now, ye rebels; shall we bring you forth water out of this rock? (v. 10).

You can see already that he's moving toward error. Moses emphasis was on the "we" as if the issue is with us. That's what happens when you are vexed by pressure from that which is external, and that comes from God's very people. Either they are complaining or crying out, or they're not saying anything, but they impose kind of a pressure on us that keeps us from a singular and sole obedience to God because there's a condescending to them. That's why the man of God, who brings the word of God as the water of God, should be free from the fear of man. He needs to come to the place where he does not need the applause of man, or his respect, or admiration, or any such thing. The moment that he does, he's committing the error of Moses, and he's on his way to terrible transgression. He thinks 'he' must do it; he must be engaging and compelling. Even Moses was susceptible to that error. What shall we say?

And Moses lifted up his hand... (v. 11).

That's the very thing that David would not do when he had his opportunity with Saul in the cave. "I will not lift up my hand and touch God's anointed." Who was God's anointed in David's case? That feeble bum who was out for his life, and who would not be placated with anything but David's death. It was Saul, the man who was going to consult witches and bring up the dead. Yet, David called him the anointed one of God. David respected the principle of God's election, God' appointment and God's anointing--even though it was defunct. David was a great warrior, and if anyone had an arm to lift up, that could slay, it was that man. Cutting the corner of Saul's garment troubled his conscience. But here we see Moses lifting up his hand in a vexation that was stirred or prompted by God's people. Moses physically struck it when God said to speak to it, and we also exert a violence maybe not physical, but even verbal, if we use words to manipulate. Any calculation on the part of a speaker to obtain success in delivery the word is striking the rock, rather than speaking to it. It makes him the agent, and that's the sinful thing that forbids our entry into the land. Note that God is merciful and gracious to give water, or the people and their livestock would have perished.

You can't understand what a quandary that was for Moses. It's not only the people with their tongues parched, and their children clutching the legs of their parents, dying of thirst, but they're hearing the bellowing of the animals, which were under their responsibility. Where is God in this seeming desolation? Even if we are not called to be speakers, we need to pray for those who are; that they would not strike the rock or be more responsive to man than to God.

The bearing of the word is a holy transaction; it's life, it's water to those who are thirsting. As Paul said, "Who is sufficient for these things? It will only begin when you know you are insufficient, and you'll not turn to any expediency to alleviate your insufficiency by striking the rock or doing anything that is your manipulation. Let us begin to trust solely in Him, and not ourselves supply something more. The requirement is absolute.

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not trust in Me to show My holiness before the eyes of the Israelites, therefore, you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them (v. 12).

Both Moses and Aaron shared in the culpability and guilt. Moses spoke, but he spoke for both. God was saying to them, "What you did was interpreted as the statement of Myself, because you are my emissary, you're my representative, you're my apostolic figure, and the way you act and conduct and speak is the statement to those who hear you as being that statement of God. By acting in a way contrary to Me, you have robbed Me of My holiness before My own people; you have not consecrated Me before the assembly."

And we're guilty of that every single time we strike the rock. If anything comes out, it's the mercy of God, but it's not the waters of life. It doesn't wash; it doesn't make clean. It may slake our initial thirst, but it is not the full benefit of living water.

As the church, we have a prophetic call to be jealous guardians of the integrity of the faith, of the word of God as the water of God, life-giving and purifying. Even as it slakes our thirst, it cleanses us from every accoutrement and aspect of death that everywhere seeks to impinge upon us, and by which we ourselves defile the sanctuary. We need the water of the word, the living waters that are running fresh. We all go through a wilderness experience in one form or another, and however inappropriate we think that place is, we need to see the beauty of the Lord in that place. The purposes of God can be fulfilled only in that place.

Let us not remain shallow preachers who have a gift of gab, and know how to fill the hour with chit-chat, or with a battery of scriptures because we cannot stay with a single text, and draw the water of life out of it. Rather, let us go on our faces before the God of Moses at the tent of meeting. Let us meet the glory of God there, and be changed.

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