

Law and Priestly Grace Numbers 17, 20

by John Nelson Darby

God brings in priestly grace to meet the difficulty of Israel's sin and to bring them through the wilderness.

Scripture: Numbers 14:13

Topics: "Grace", "Faith in God's Provision"

Description

John Nelson Darby emphasizes the contrast between law and priestly grace in the context of Israel's journey through the wilderness, illustrating how God's grace is revealed through their sin. He explains that while the law could not lead them into the Promised Land, priestly grace, exemplified by Aaron's rod, provides life-giving power and intercession. Despite Israel's unbelief and murmuring, God remains faithful, using priestly grace to meet their needs and demonstrating that Christ's priesthood is essential for their journey. Darby highlights that even in failure, God's grace prevails, allowing believers to draw near to Him without the need for judgment. Ultimately, he underscores that God's grace is sufficient to carry us through life's challenges, reminding us of the importance of faith in His provision.

Transcript

Putting these two chapters together, we see the grace of God in priestly government, to bring His redeemed through the wilderness, and also the contrast between law and priestly grace.

This grace is drawn out by Israel's sin; but grace does not, of course, allow sin. Law could not bring the people into the land. Law must have kept the whole nation out, except Joshua and Caleb, who followed the Lord fully. We see its actings in chapter 16, in the judgment that fell on Korah and his company. If when redeemed, we were put under the law, we should be no better off than before. Still, God cannot allow sin. Neither could He give the people up; for had He not redeemed them? as Moses pleaded with Him (Num. 14:13-16), "And Moses said unto Jehovah, Then the Egyptians shall hear it (for thou broughtest up this people in thy might from among them), and they will tell it to the inhabitants of this land . . . saying, Because Jehovah was not able to bring this people into the land which he swore unto them, therefore he hath slain them in the wilderness." He cannot give them up; He cannot allow sin; and therefore He brings in priestly grace to meet the difficulty. To take away their murmurings, He does not use the rod of Moses, but that of Aaron. The rod of Moses could only judge them for their sin, and thus take away their murmurings by judgment. But Aaron's does it by priestly grace.

God makes it very manifest by whom He will act. Aaron's rod is chosen out of the twelve, and the remarkable sign of its blossoming and yielding fruit, shewed that priesthood was connected with life-giving

power, as well as with intercession. Both are needed to uphold them, and to raise them when failing. "The second Adam was made a quickening spirit." This is the care and authority by which we are led through the wilderness. God will allow no other, and no other would do. The priesthood of Christ alone can carry us through. It is the rod of authority too: for "Christ is a son over his own house." But we see that unbelief cannot avail itself of this (chap. 17:12, 13). "And the children of Israel spake unto Moses, saying, Behold, we die, we perish, we all perish. Whosoever cometh anything near unto the tabernacle of Jehovah shall die: shall we be consumed with dying?" God had shewn them that there was this grace, and they ought to have trusted in it, especially as they had seen the power in Aaron's remaining in among the congregation, and staying the plague. They had ground for full assurance; but unbelief prevailed. They were insensible to the value of the priesthood, and their conscience was still under law. For they did not know God, though at the very moment He was acting for them in priestly grace.

289 The circumstances of chapter 20 put them to the test: the outward power, too, that had brought them out of Egypt was passing away from their minds. Miriam, the expression of it, had died. When apparent power decays, faith is put to the test. Afterwards Moses passed away too. Unbelief does not get the refreshment that faith does. There is no water. They were in a terrible state of mind - wishing they had shared the judgment that had fallen on their brethren - for there was no confidence in Jehovah. Yet they called themselves the congregation of Jehovah. They had the pride, but not the comfort, of it. Moses and Aaron fell on their faces. There seemed no remedy. But Jehovah appeared. He was the only remedy. And He makes Aaron's rod the means of the application of that remedy. It had already been appointed before the occasion for its exercise occurred. There was real need, and God never denies this. He never says it is not real need; but He will have us go to Christ to meet the need. It was not to be Moses's rod, for then it must be judgment. Nor was the rock to be smitten again. That water could be had now without smiting the rock was the result of its having been smitten before by the rod of judgment,

So it is with us. Everything comes to us through Christ's having been on the cross; and we do not need the cross again, but the priestly work. It was now, "speak ye unto the rock before their eyes, and it shall give forth his water." Speak the word only, and the water shall flow. All things are ours; we draw nigh now, not for acceptance, but to have our need supplied. In verses 9, 10, we see that Moses was vexed, and speaks unadvisedly. He could not rise to the height of God's grace; and that was why he could not enter the land. He was in a better mind the first time Israel murmured. Then he said, "It is not against us ye murmur, but against Jehovah"; now he says, "Must we fetch you water out of this rock?" setting up Aaron and himself, and using Jehovah's authority to do it. He smites the rock too. There would really have been more glory to Moses if he had spoken instead of smiting, but he did not see this.

290 God called Aaron's rod "the rod." The other was set aside. They were never under that rod again. It is Christ for us, or nothing. Any other principle must have dealt with them as with Korah. It is only a word now, and every blessing flows. To smite the rock again would be the same as saying, because we fail Christ must die again. It is denying grace to say that anything is needed now except intercession. To "sanctify him" would be to give Him credit for all that He is, as He has revealed Himself. To "sanctify him in our hearts" is to attach to Him all that He is. But Moses did not do this. He did not count upon God's grace, which was all that was needed. But does God stop His grace because of this? Does He stop the outflowing of the water to quench their thirst? No, He does not. If Moses failed to sanctify Him before the people, He will only the more sanctify Himself before them. He comes in Himself when the one who should act fails. Just as when the disciples, who ought to have been able to cast the evil spirit out of the child, failed in doing so, Jesus, coming down from the mount of transfiguration, said, "Bring him to me." It was

wrong that they could not cast him out, but His own personal interference was gained through it. He gives the people the water they need, in spite of Moses's unbelief and their murmuring. He will act according to the rod of His appointing, if Moses does not.

Thus Christ never fails in carrying on that which as Priest He has undertaken. Israel should have walked under the power and comfort of that rod. They saw the blossoms and the fruit, and should have counted on it. If there is anything we want, and we doubt of getting it, because we say we do not deserve it, that is putting ourselves under the law. It is forgetting that there is "the rod"; and that it is, "speak the word only." God takes away the murmurings by grace. He deals with all our evil, as His children, in grace. Look at Peter's case. Was it because he repented that Jesus prayed for him that his faith should not fail? We know it was not. And was it because Peter wept that the Lord turned and looked upon him? It was afterwards that he wept. When we do wrong, priestly grace acts for us, and obtains for us grace to see, and confess, and put it away. Christ probes the heart Of Peter, but does not leave him in the evil. This is the privilege of His children. Grace sends the gospel to the world. Grace gives priesthood to the church. It all originates in God. If I sin, it is not I who go to the Priest, but He goes to God for me. It is not said, If a man repents, but if he sins, "we have an advocate with the Father." When, through the action of priestly grace, a sense of my sin is given me, I go to God for strength against it. It is He who obtains that for me which brings me back to God. All this is the fruit of His unsolicited grace. It was God who appointed the rod. He is the God of grace, in spite of all our evil; and when we see it we are confounded. Carrying us through the wilderness is as much grace as redemption and forgiveness. Even when Israel strove with God, He was "sanctified in them." It is very sad to have "Meribah" (chiding, or strife) written on any part of our history - sad as to us - but He makes it an opportunity for His grace. They get just what they want, though Moses is shut out from Canaan. He would make them know the extent of His grace. Another time grace might act in a different way - in chastening, perhaps, if needed; but this taught them what the character and extent of the grace was. just the same grace that spoke in Isaiah 43:22: "Thou hast been weary of me." "I have not wearied thee, but thou hast wearied me with thine iniquities." What language for God to use! yet He goes on: "I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions for my own sake." Nothing can make us more ashamed of our unbelief than this astonishing grace. And all because of Christ. Nothing makes us hate sin like this.

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