

Wilderness Grace

by John Nelson Darby

John Nelson Darby's sermon 'Wilderness Grace' explores God's grace in the journey of Israel, emphasizing lessons learned in the wilderness and the importance of dependence on God.

Scripture: Exodus 14:13-14, Exodus 16:4-5, Exodus 17:1-7, Isaiah 38:16, Jeremiah 20:7-9, Luke 5:8, John 15:5, Romans 3:19, Galatians 3:19-22, Hebrews 2:14

Topics: "Dependence On God", "Grace in Trials"

Description

John Nelson Darby emphasizes the concept of 'Wilderness Grace,' illustrating how God's grace was evident in Israel's journey from Egypt to Sinai, despite their constant murmuring and disobedience. He explains that the law was introduced to reveal humanity's inability to uphold God's standards, while God's promises of grace were given freely, independent of human merit. The wilderness experience serves as a time of testing and dependence on God, where believers learn to rely on His provision and grace amidst trials. Darby highlights that true victory comes through recognizing our weakness and God's strength, culminating in worship and dependence on Him.

Transcript

WILDERNESS GRACE

Exodus 17

Those who are familiar with the study of this part of scripture will remember that the history of Israel from the Red Sea to Sinai (that is, from the time of their deliverance out of Egypt until they placed themselves under law) contains an exceedingly remarkable testimony to the grace of God.

At Sinai Israel took up the promises of God on the condition of their own obedience, and then their entire failure was manifested. But up to that moment all God's dealings with them had been in grace. Though there was continual murmuring and unbelief and disobedience, He did not chasten for these things as afterwards, when they had taken a stand before Him on the ground of obedience. It was an immense transition in their history.

The law "came in" as it were (though of course it was perfect in itself) "by the bye," between the promises and the accomplishment of the promises, to shew what the condition of man would be if he stood on his own ground before God. The law was not before the promises, the apostle argues (Gal. 3), "

that it should make the promise of none effect." Promise was given first. And " He to whom the promises were made " came after the law. Meanwhile the law entered in order to manifest what man was, and the effect that would be produced on man when placed on the ground of obedience to the known will of God.*

* " All that the Lord hath said will we do, and be obedient." These words (the response of the people with one voice, when Moses had taken the book of the covenant and read in their audience, Exod. 24) were the complete confounding of two very distinct principles, which man has been continually mistaking and confounding since the fall of Adam-responsibility and power. Man is responsible to keep the law perfectly, but by the fall he has lost the power. This the natural heart cannot understand. One man denies his responsibility, and another assumes his power; grace, and this only, puts a man right on both points.

It was needful to do this, because of the constant tendency of the heart to put itself under law, in spite of repeated failures ; not that God's promises of grace were not simple and clear, but because of this natural tendency of the heart of man. Supposing my conscience to be awakened, I must know that it is my duty (that I ought) to please and obey God. The effect of this naturally is that I expect God would accept me on this condition. Till a man is brought to feel his really lost state, this is very natural. It is quite too late to talk of pleasing and obeying God when we know ourselves to be lost sinners.

Now God, who is wonderfully painstaking with us for our blessing, sent the law, in order that this tendency of man's heart, and his utter worthlessness, might be shewn out, and proved to man.* But before He did this, He had made known abounding grace, pure grace, flowing from His own thoughts and purposes, without any reference to the feelings of man about Him, or any condition of man's obedience.

* See Romans 3:19

So that those whose hearts were opened to believe the promises could rest in peace upon them all the while they were learning more of their own sinfulness through the law. The very starting point of all God's dealings with us is pure grace, suitable to sinners, whose state He knows, and therefore knows how to meet.

There was no promise given to Adam before he fell. He needed none ; he was happy in his innocence and then present condition. And after he had sinned, the promise given was not made to rest on anything in him. The Lord came down to the garden, saying, " Adam, where art thou ? " that he might be made to feel what the condition was into which sin had plunged him: and he answered, " I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself." The Lord did not give a promise to Adam (for He could not, in the state of sin in which he was, without dealing lightly with sin ; neither could He leave Adam without promise, unless He cast him into remediless despair). What God does is to bring in " the seed of the woman "-the second Adam. There was not a word of promise to Adam personally : the promise was made to the " seed of the woman " in pronouncing the curse on the serpent-" I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel." This was a promise for Adam, one on which his soul might rest, one faith could lay hold of-no promise to Adam in his sin, but a promise of blessing in and to Christ. And it appears that through grace Adam did rest on this interference of God, for he afterwards speaks of Eve as " the mother of all living."

This was developed onwards and onwards till we come to the history of Abraham; where it is revealed still more definitely " In thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed." Isaac was only the type of Christ. " Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as

of one, and to thy seed, which is Christ." Thus Christ was the Seed to whom the promise was made; Gal. 3. " All the promises of God in him are yea, and in him Amen," and we, through grace, can now add, cc unto the glory of God by us."

The promises were not only made to Abraham (Gen. 12) and to his seed, but confirmed to the seed through resurrection (Gen. 22). This was shewn in Abraham's being commanded to offer up Isaac, and his receiving of him again from the dead cc in a figure " (as the apostle speaks, Heb. ii). Christ takes the promises, not as on earth incarnate, but as risen from the dead. Without His death and resurrection we could have had no part in them, for God cannot bless people in sin. " What concord hath Christ with Belial ? " It is impossible that there could be communion between God and the sinner in his sins. If the Lord Jesus had not died and become the source of a new life to the sinner, we could have had no portion with Him in these promises. After the resurrection of Isaac there was a confirmation to the seed of the promises made to Abraham. cc By myself have I sworn, saith the LORD, for because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son: that in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven . . . and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed." This is referred to by the Spirit in the Epistle to the Galatians.

As to blessing, unless we speak of the presumption of our own thoughts about sin, we must look to Christ in reference to it. All the blessing is Christ's ; it belongs to Him ; and to us only as having our portion in and with Him. It all rests on promise, without any reference to the state of man. Our strength and comfort is in seeing this, that it flows down from God as the expression of His thoughts towards us. just as water reaching a thirsty man, the water has only to do with the thirsty man as it regards quenching his thirst ; it does not come from, but merely to, him.

There was then the sentence of punishment pronounced on the serpent, and the promise given to the Seed. All is of grace, and in Christ.

The Lord having settled this great basis of truth, that all is of grace in Christ, and established in resurrection, He began to manifest His ways more in detail ; and that first, amongst His own people Israel, the seed of Abraham after the flesh. He began to shew, not merely His grace in giving His promises to the Seed, on which faith might lay hold, but His own considerate love in caring for the need and sorrows of His people. When once it was completely settled that the promises came simply from God and from His love, then He shews that He can consider all the need of His people, and take every possible thought about them and their sorrows, saying to Moses (chap. 3), " I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters ; for I know their sorrows ; and I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey; unto the place of the Canaanites, and the Hittites, and the Amorites, and the Perizzites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Now therefore, behold, the cry of the children of Israel is come unto me : and I have also seen the oppression wherewith the Egyptians oppress them," etc. He took notice of every circumstance of their trouble and sorrow.

Having sent this message to them by the hand of Moses, that He knew their sorrows, and having touched their heart in this way, giving them confidence in His love in spite of their sinfulness, so that " the people believed, and bowed their head and worshipped," He does not pass over their sin. He cannot help seeing their evil ; and if He is to have them in communion with Himself He must take notice of their condition towards Himself as well as towards Pharaoh ; that is to say, that of being sinners. God and sin must be always at variance : we ourselves feel it to be so. When quickened and convinced of sin, the first

expression of our hearts, like that of Peter's,* is " Depart from me, for I am sinful man, O Lord." We see at once, as he did, that God's holiness cannot, ought not, to allow of sin. There is always great ignorance in us when we say this, though it is a very true feeling; for it is as though we

thought that the Lord did not know a great deal more of what is in our hearts than we do ourselves. A moment's consideration in the case of Peter would have made him feel, The Lord knew that I was a sinful man before He came into my ship; and yet He came: surely then I need not shrink from Him.

* See Luke 5.

The Lord gives us confidence in Himself by taking the start of us about the knowledge of our sinfulness. Jesus said to Peter, " Fear not; from henceforth thou shalt catch men " -planting him at once in confidence in Himself, because shewing him that though He knew quite well he was a sinner, yet His purpose was to make him the means of saving sinners. It was as much as to say, You need not shrink from me; for if I could not meet you in grace and put away your sin, I could not of course make use of you to save others.

In bringing Israel into direct fellowship with Himself, God shewed, by putting the blood on their doorposts (chap. 12), that when He executed judgment on Egypt He secured deliverance from it to His people. And just so in God's dealings with us ; the judgment that has passed on Christ because of sin is the security of the church (of every believer) against judgment. When the soul apprehends the Lord Jesus as the one offering for sin, it has confidence in God; and that on the very ground of His knowing thoroughly our sinfulness. It is impossible that God should pass over the blood of the Lord Jesus, and impute to sinners those sins which He has washed away. He cannot, impute sin to a believer without condemning the value of His blood-shedding, and virtually denying the efficacy of it. And if that be true when He judges men by-and-by, it must be true now. Faith knows that death is God's own sentence against sin, and that it has been executed on Christ in the sinner's stead. Faith " sets to its seal that God is true," and receives His thoughts who has said about the blood-shedding of Jesus, " When I see the blood, I will pass over."

But there is another thing: it is not merely that God says, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people, I know their sorrows," etc. ; there must be also His power put forth in delivering. This is shewn in the passage of the Israelites through the Red Sea (chap. 14), and to us in the Lord Jesus having " through death destroyed him that had the power of death," Heb. 2 : 14- In the cross Satan put forth all his power and energy against the Prince of life; and he did it successfully, arraying both Jew and Gentile against Him (it was " your hour and the power, of darkness," Luke 22 : 53) ; but in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus the mightiest power of Satan was destroyed for ever. And so with Israel; God had taken up the cause of His people. It was not merely that He had given them peace through the blood sprinkled on their doorposts. but He Himself had entered into conflict with their enemies, and Satan's power in enslaving them was completely gone. We may have been brought to see the sinfulness and evil of our condition before God, and the power of the blood of Jesus in satisfying the holiness of God ; but we do not know liberty till we see God for us in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

What was the effect of deliverance to Israel ? and what is the effect of our deliverance from the bondage of Pharaoh (Satan looked at as such) ? To bring into the wilderness, and not at once into Canaan. Being in the wilderness implies all sorts of trials. It may seem strange to sight, that they who had just been singing the song of triumph and deliverance (chap 15) should be allowed to be three days in the wilderness without water; and then, when they came to water, should find it so bitter that they could not drink of it. But God permits these trials, in order that we may see our own need and prove His faithfulness.

From the Red Sea to Sinai Israel proved the grace which belongs to us now. Let us ever remember, when speaking of the wilderness, that though there is trial in it, and plenty of trial, it is the place of the ministration of grace. The Lord's previous dealings were, as I may say, preliminary: He brought Israel into the wilderness in order to have them quite alone with Himself, that He might teach them what He was ; as He said afterwards, " Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself," chap. 19: 4. He lets us pass through these trials that we may thoroughly understand that all is from God there. The eagle's wing never tires or fails. It is either the most blessed triumph, security, and victory, that we enjoy, or it is nothing. It is wonderful how our hearts cling, not only to the thought of our own righteousness, but to the practical denial of our not having any strength in ourselves. Many have peace in Jesus, who do not see so entirely that they have no strength, either for service or conflict. Well, they learn it in the wilderness. Our journey through the wilderness is the weaning us from trusting in ourselves, in order that we may trust only in God.

The first thing God taught Israel in the wilderness was, that they could not get a drop of water except He gave it to them. They were kept without it three days ; and when they came to water at last (when there was something within reach that man seemed able to grasp), they could not drink of it, it was so bitter ; until the Lord shewed Moses a tree to cast into the waters, which made them sweet. The Lord causes that which was death to become the means of life, as Hezekiah says, " O Lord, by these things men live, and in all these things is the life of my spirit," Isa. 38. In death to the flesh there is life to the spirit.

In chapter 16 the Israelites want bread and begin to murmur again. The Lord deals with them in grace and gives them bread. But it was such bread as shewed them, morning by morning, that they must depend on Him. Had He withheld the manna one day, they would have had nothing to eat, for they could not keep it till the morrow; " it bred worms, and stank." The Lord will not allow us to lay up anything (no, not even grace) in store that would tend to lead us into independence of Himself : it will turn to evil if we do. He shewed His people perpetual grace in His dealings towards them; but He never took them, nor can He ever take us, out of the condition of dependence on Himself. The manna was the type of Christ ; as the water was of the Spirit.

Soon after (chapter 17), in journeying from the wilderness of Sin, we find the Israelites murmuring again because they had no water. " Wherefore the people did chide with Moses, and said, Give us water that we may drink." But new murmurings only bring out fresh grace (for they had not yet come to Sinai) : God gave them water. His grace abounded where their sin abounded. The more they murmured, the more in one sense they got.

I would just remark in passing, that it is sin not to have confidence in the Lord, not to be quite sure that He will help us, whatever the need may be, when we are walking in His ways. It is recorded of the children of Israel as sin, that they tempted the Lord in that which they said here, " Is the Lord among us, or not ? " (v. 7). When we are going on wickedly and wilfully, and say, " Is not the Lord among us ? none evil can come upon us " (Mic. 3 : 1)., this is quite a different thing. Our God will indeed be with us, if His children, even then ; but to chasten us. Whenever there is real need in the wilderness, it is sin to doubt whether God will help us or not. If we are not as sure of water in the midst of the sandy desert as though we saw rivers of water running through the country, we are tempting God.

This is the force of that expression of our Lord to Satan, "It is written, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God." Satan wanted Jesus to try by an experiment whether God would be as good as His word. Had He done so, it would have implied a doubt. His answer was, " It is written, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy

God."- Tempting the Lord is doubting the supply of His goodness in giving us all that we need.

The supply of water and of manna to the Israelites did not take them out of trouble. They drank and were refreshed: there was the gathering up a little strength, and then Amalek comes and fights against them. It was but the preparation for conflict. So those who feed on Christ as the manna, and have in their souls the well of water springing up into everlasting life, have still the wilderness and conflict with Amalek.

In that sense we have to do with Satan, though we are entirely delivered from his bondage. We are never more under the power of Satan, as Israel was under the power of Pharaoh. (If Israel binds itself to Amalek, it is its own fault.) It is said to us, " Sin shall not have the dominion over you ; for ye are not under law, but under grace." But we have to fight with Amalek though delivered from Pharaoh. When we have been brought into the wilderness, and fed and refreshed through this grace, Christian conflict begins. We are called, like the Lord Jesus, never to doubt the Father's love ; but was He out of conflict ? No, it was just the very thing that set Him in it. The being delivered from the bondage of Satan, and the being ranged on the Lord's side, is that which brings us into conflict ; and in this the Lord never lets us be taken out of dependence on Himself. The moment we forget this we shall be overcome. Satan can never make us his slaves again, but we may be beaten and wounded by him. In every detail of our lives there is no blessing but in dependence on God. Whenever self-dependence comes in, whenever our own wills are working, there is failure. If in speaking to you now I were to cease from depending on the Lord in doing it, all blessing to my own soul would cease. " Without me ye can do nothing," John 15 : 5. Neither can I speak, nor you hear, to profit without dependence on Him. If a Christian gets out of dependence on the Lord, he will be beaten by Satan in conflict. Yet we ought not merely not to be beaten by Satan, but ever to be gaining ground upon him. Whether it be in winning souls to Christ, or whether it be in making progress truly ourselves in knowledge, or in holiness, or in love, we are gaining ground on Satan's possessions. We have been delivered from the power of darkness, and translated into the kingdom of God's dear Son. As Satan takes possession of my heart by ignorance, then every step I make in the knowledge of God is gain on the possession of Satan. He uses our flesh too ; so that to mortify and keep the flesh in death is gaining ground upon him. But every inch must be won, every bit of knowledge gained, by conflict. In this conflict we are directly and hourly cast in dependence upon God.

God did not put Amalek out of the way of Israel-they must fight with him: and it is just so with us. " And Moses said unto Joshua, Choose us out men, and go out, fight with Amalek ; to-morrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the rod of God in my hand," v. 9. This is very different from what we get in chapter 14, " The Lord shall fight for you, and ye shall hold your peace."

See what the Lord had said to Moses concerning Israel (chap. 3 : 8) ; that He would " bring them up out of the land of Egypt unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey." Now where are they brought ? Into the wilderness, to thirst for water, and to fight with Amalek! They had not reckoned on this (v. 3). And thus it is often with the saints of God; when they have had joy, and have sung the song of triumph, in being delivered from the power of Satan, they are afterwards astonished at finding themselves not in Canaan but in the wilderness, Jeremiah found the Lord's word the joy and rejoicing of his heart (Jer. 15 : 16), yet afterwards he was so discouraged that he says, " O LORD, thou hast deceived me, and I was deceived " : of course this is only a strong expression of sorrow, " thou art stronger than I. and hast prevailed : I am in derision daily, every one mocketh me. For since I spake, I cried out, I cried violence and spoil ; because the word of the LORD was made a reproach unto me, and a derision, daily. Then I said, I will not make mention of him, nor speak any more in his name," etc. (Jer. 20). When the saint finds what the road is, he is apt to forget the end, where there will be fulness of joy and blessing. The Lord desires to

purge out that which would hinder our blessing and keep us from having our hearts and hopes set upon the end, and to humble us.

Moses,* Aaron, and Hur go up to the top of the hill, and Israel under Joshua fights in the plain below with Amalek (v. 10). They fought the Lord's battle : but it is not sufficient even to be fighting the Lord's battle unless the Lord stretches forth His hand to help them. Otherwise " Amalek prevailed." Israel might have reasoned on the manner of their fighting, on the strength of the enemy, and on ten thousand things ; but after all, their success depended on Moses' hands being stretched out. It is very hard for us to see ourselves and Satan to be as nothing, and God to be everything. The moment we get out of dependence on God, we find out our own weakness ; though we have this comfort, that under whatever circumstances, through the priesthood and the righteousness of the Lord Jesus, our blessing is substantially maintained for us, and this until the going down of the sun. " And it came to pass, when Moses held up his hand, that Israel prevailed: and when he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed. But Moses' hands were heavy; and they took a stone, and put it under him, and he sat thereon ; and Aaron and Hur stayed up his hands, the one on the one side, and the other on the other side ; and his hands were steady until the going down of the sun," v. 11, 12. Enemies were as nothing when Israel had the power of God with them. The day is won-" Joshua discomfited Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword."

* Moses held in his hand " the rod of God "-the symbol of the power of God, that which had worked the defeat and destruction of Pharaoh.

" And the LORD said unto Moses, Write this for a memorial in a book, and rehearse it in the ears of Joshua : for I will utterly put out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven. And Moses built an altar, and called the name of it Jehovah - (i.e., Jehovah my banner): for he said, Because the Lord hath sworn that Jehovah will have war with Amalek from generation to generation," v. 14-16. I dare say many of us have thought, when we have seen the necessity of dependence on the Lord, that one good battle with Satan, and all will be over; but no such thing, we have security and the certainty of victory, but no promise of cessation from conflict whilst in the wilderness. God has promised that He " will bruise Satan under our feet shortly " ; as He said to Israel that He would " utterly put out the name of Amalek from under heaven"; but still "Jehovah will have war with Amalek from generation to generation." Till Christ comes, and Satan will be bound, and we shall have the full result of victory, we must reckon on conflict (not on slavery to Pharaoh, but on war with Amalek), but with the comfort of knowing that it is Jehovah who makes war, though it is through Israel, and Israel therefore has to fight. It is the Lord's battle against Satan there is our comfort, but still a battle which we have to carry on ; hence we are kept in an unceasing state of dependence. The moment it was not so, Israel were put to the worse.

As it regards the accusations of Satan, the blood on the doorposts is the eternal answer to that. As to slavery to Satan, the Lord Jesus has delivered us from that ; we have stood, the living ones, on the other side of the Red Sea ; and we " shall see " Pharaoh and his host " no more again for ever." What we find in the desert is, grace, conflict and the Lord having war with Amalek from generation to generation. We are to be kept, moment by moment, in a state of dependence, yet reckoning on the constant grace and help of God. There is not blessing and joy and comfort where there is not dependence on the Lord exercised. It is not enough for victory that in the battle we have ranged ourselves on the Lord's side. You will find the tendency of the flesh, whether in praying or preaching or anything else, is to get out of dependence on God. We may be saying true things in prayer or in testimony ; but if we are not realising our dependence on the Lord, we shall not have His strength in the battle ; and the Lord must make us learn our dependence on Him, through weakness, and failure, and defeat, because we have refused to learn it in

the joy and confidence of communion with Himself.

Victory is turned to worship in the scene before us. " And Moses built an altar, and called the name of it Jehovah-nissi-the Lord is my banner." When victory does not tend to worship, we and God part company as soon as the victory is achieved. How sad to see victory often leading to mere joy, instead of still greater dependence on, and delight in, God!

May we trace out, in all these paths of His wondrous ways, still more and more of the depths of His divine love!

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