

# The Ecclesia in The Wilderness

Hebrews chapter 13 describes how that the Salvation which comes through the name of Christ is outside of the established order of things:

“Wherefore Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered *without the gate*. Let us go forth therefore unto him *without the camp*, bearing his reproach. For here we have no continuing city, but we seek one to come” (Heb. 13:12-13).

In these words, we have a principle being established: both Messiah and his brethren bear the reproach of men, in a time when they forsake the temporal things of this world in order to achieve life in the world to come. Like those who followed king David into the wilderness, and the cave of Adullam we are dissatisfied with what the present world has to offer, and seek no continuance therein. We follow Messiah’s lead to go outside the camp, and throw in our lot with him, so to speak, awaiting the time when he will be king over Israel, and his dominion will be global.

In this regard, we find ourselves wandering in a spiritual wilderness on our journey through life towards the promised inheritance. We are in a similar position as Israel of old: we have left spiritual Egypt behind, and press on towards the land of promise. We, as Israel, are mere sojourners and travellers through the wilderness, seeking no continuance until we are invited to enter the land promised to the Fathers of old. Israel are described as being “*the ecclesia in the wilderness*” (Acts 7:38) in our New Testament reading for today, and it is this aspect that we shall examine for our exhortation this morning.

Genesis 28 describes Isaac’s blessing to his son Jacob, when he sent him away to obtain a wife and family in Padan-aram:

“... God Almighty bless thee, and make thee fruitful, and multiply thee, that thou mayest be *a multitude of people*; And give thee the blessing of Abraham; to thee, and to thy seed with thee; that thou mayest inherit the land wherein thou art a stranger, which God gave to Abraham” (Gen. 28:3-4).

What is of particular interest for our present consideration, is the word rendered “a multitude of people”. The same word is used in Psalm 22 thus: “I will declare thy name unto my brethren: in the midst of the *congregation* will I praise thee” (Psa. 22:22). Here, the word “congregation” is the same Hebrew word. This Psalm is quoted in Hebrews, and applied to our Lord Jesus Christ: “both he that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of one: for which cause he is not ashamed to call them brethren, Saying, I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst *of the ecclesia* will I sing praise unto thee” (Heb. 2:11-12). The point here, is that the Spirit translates this word into the Greek word “ekklesia” – which indicates that Isaac was desiring that God Almighty would make Jacob into a congregation, or *ecclesia* of people!

Also of interest, is that in Genesis 28, Isaac desires that Yahweh would “give thee the blessing of Abraham” (vs 4), which phrase is again picked up by the Spirit in Galatians 3, which describes the Gospel in terms of the promised made to Abraham through to Isaac:

“Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us ... that *the blessing of Abraham* might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.” (Gal. 3:13-14).

Just as “the blessing of Abraham” would come upon Jacob and his family ecclesia, even so it comes to the Gentiles through faith in Abraham’s greater Seed, through whom all of the promises would be fulfilled.

The family of Abraham through Isaac developed into an *ecclesia in the wilderness*, after being brought out of Egypt by a mighty display of the power of the Almighty. So it is recorded that “God assayed to go and take him *a nation from the midst of another nation*, by temptations, by signs, and by wonders and by war, and by a stretched out arm, and by great terrors ...” (Deut. 4:34). Never before had the Almighty chosen Him a nation, calling them out of the midst of another nation, to shape them into a people suitable for the glory of His Name. But the same principle of divine selection operates in our day also. Describing how Gentiles are drawn out of the kingdoms of men, to be a holy people in the sight of Yahweh, Simon “declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to *take out of them a people* for his name” (Acts 15:14). There is an important point to consider here regarding our separation from those nations from which we are called out. Just as Israel were totally severed from Egypt, so we must be severed from spiritual Egypt. Our separation, like as in Israel of old, is a complete departure from the ways of the world – the established order of things, as we pass through the wilderness. Yet how regrettable it is, that like the Israelites of old, there are those whose heart remains in Egypt, and their sympathies lie with the world and all the pleasures thereof.

Following their departure from Egypt, Israel underwent a symbolic baptism:

“Moreover brethren, I would not that ye should be ignorant, how that all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; *and were all baptized* unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea” (1 Cor. 10:1-2).

The passing through the baptismal waters of the Sea marked the final severance of Yahweh’s holy nation from Egypt. The waters parted to allow them safe passage through, as on dry land – yet those waters resumed their course and swept away the Egyptian army, that they would be seen no more. Even so, when we pass through our baptismal waters, we are given an escape from the corruption that is in the world through lust, to begin our journey to the Promised Land. We are baptised into Christ, the One who saves us from sin and death, and who is able to lead us through death to eternal life.

Isaiah 63 describes the passing of Moses and the people through the red sea, in terms which remind us of our position through faith in Christ. Speaking of Israel we read:

“... but they rebelled and vexed his holy Spirit: therefor he was turned to be their enemy, and he fought against them. Then he remembered the days of old, Moses and his people, saying, Where is he that brought them up out of the sea with *the shepherd of the flock?*” (Isa. 63:10-12).

Moses then, as the shepherd of the flock, led Israel through the baptismal waters of the Red Sea, to emerge the other side as a holy people devoted to their Lord. Yet it didn’t take long for them to rebel, and vex His holy Spirit. The same idea is developed in Hebrews chapter 13:

“Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great *shepherd of the sheep*, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, Make you perfect in every good work to do his will” (Heb. 13:20-21).

Just as Moses led his people through the waters, so Messiah leads his people through death. He was brought again from the dead upon the basis of the principles that lay behind the shedding of his blood, and he, like Moses is a shepherd of the flock, leading his people into glory. They, like he, will be brought again from the dead by the blood of the everlasting covenant, which is far superior than the old Covenant that came through Moses. The Old covenant was a ministration of condemnation and death,

whereas the blood of the everlasting covenant is able to give life to those who have faith in it. We are therefore, led through death into life, in order that we be doers of His Will, even as our Lord and Master.

The passing of Israel through the waters illustrates another principle that helps us to understand a saying of the inspired Apostle Paul. He wrote:

“There hath no trial taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tried above that ye are able; but will with the trial also *make a way to escape*, that ye may be able to bear it. “(1 Cor. 10:13).

After Israel left Egypt, they were led to the brink of the Red Sea. They had the Egyptian army behind them, and the barrier of waters in front of them. Humanly speaking, there was no escape from the advancing army. Yet Yahweh would not leave them with no escape: He parted the sea to provide an escape, the nature of which provided salvation from the people, and death to the Egyptians. They were delivered from the mightiest men of the Egyptian army, to be led into future glory, if they would remain faithful on their journey.

Interestingly, there is a subtle point made in Hebrews 11, which gives us some insight as to the mind of the people as they passed through the sea. Speaking of Moses, we read:

“by faith he forsook Egypt ... through faith he kept the Passover, and the sprinkling of blood, lest he that destroyed the firstborn should touch them. By faith they passed through the Red sea as by dry land; which the Egyptians assaying to do were drowned.” (Heb. 11:27-29).

Notice here: it was by faith that HE forsook Egypt and kept the Passover, but it was by faith that THEY passed through the Red sea. In other words, Moses alone understood and had faith in the Passover and the significance of what it represented, but all of the people together had faith in the parting of the Red sea, as they passed through it under the leadership of Moses. Even so, Messiah first had faith in being the Passover Lamb, and all that it represented, but we all who pass through the waters of Baptism trust in his power to save, and the principles which mark out our departure from Egypt.

Subsequent to their deliverance thus described, Moses led the people to mount Horeb, where a covenant was made with the people. And in this, he again foreshadowed Messiah, and the making of a covenant with Yahweh through him. He was a mediator, bringing the Word of Yahweh to the people:

“Yahweh talked with you face to face in the mount out of the midst of the fire. I stood between Yahweh and you at that time, to shew you the word of Yahweh ...” (Deut. 5:4-5).

So also Christ is a mediator between God and the men that would come to him in faith:

“... for there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus ...” (1 Tim. 2:5).

Under the Law, there was a difference between a Mediator and a High Priest. The two offices were held by different people: Moses was the Mediator, and Aaron was the High Priest. But both come together in Messiah, who was a priestly mediator. The Mediator represented God before man, and the High Priest represented man before God. But our Lord fulfilled both roles. Our statement of faith expresses the matter very succinctly thus:

“ XIII. That on the third day, God raised him from the dead, and exalted him to the heavens *as priestly mediator between God and man*, in the process of gathering from among them a people who should be saved by the belief and obedience of the Truth.- 1 Cor. 15:4; Acts 10:40; 13:30-37; 2:24-27).

Returning back to 1 Corinthians chapter 10, we find that whilst all Israel partook of the benefits, not all remained faithful:

“... they did *all* eat the same spiritual meat; And did *all* drink the same spiritual drink ... but with *many* of them God was not well pleased: for they were overthrown in the wilderness ... neither be ye idolaters as were *some* of them ... neither let us commit fornication as *some* of them committed ... Neither let us tempt Christ, as *some* of them tempted ... Neither murmur ye, as *some* of them also murmured ... New all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come ...” (1 Cor. 10:3-11).

It was not all of people who were overthrown in the wilderness because of idolatry, fornication, tempting and murmuring. But the faithful were very much in the minority: there were only two named in the record: Joshua and Caleb, a Jew and a Gentile. These men were strong in faith, when all around them, the people were rebelling against Yahweh, who had delivered them from the power of Egypt. Interestingly, the writer to the Hebrews also describes their failings in most instructive terms:

“... for some, when they had heard did provoke: howbeit *not all* that came out of Egypt by Moses. ... for unto us was the Gospel preached, as well as unto them: but the word preached did not profit them, but *they were not united by faith to those who listened*” (Hebrews 3:16, 4:2).

The italicised words follow the ESV rendering, which on this occasion gives the sense better. Although there were only two men who believed, Israel ought to have been united by faith with them, yet they were not. The admonition is there for us: we need to be united by faith to those who listen to the Word, and seek to show it to others. There is much to be said for a union with those of like precious faith, by contrast to the majority who go their own way into perdition and destruction.

The other point that comes out from a consideration of Hebrews chapter 3, is that it was not sin that kept them out of their inheritance, but lack of faith, or belief:

“and to whom sware he that they should not enter into his rest, but to them that *believed not?* So we see that they could not enter in *because of unbelief.*” (Heb. 3:18-19).

So it is, that sin will not keep us out of the kingdom to come, but lack of faith. If we have faith, sin is not imputed to us (see Romans chapter 4). Faith is counted for righteousness; our sins are blotted out for His Name's sake. But without faith, we are dead in our trespasses and sins, and we will be excluded from the promised land.

We read in Acts chapter 7, that the “ecclesia in the wilderness” had the ordinances regarding the Tabernacle system, to instruct and guide them:

“Our Fathers had *the tabernacle of witness* in the wilderness, as he had appointed, speaking unto Moses, that he should make it according to the fashion that he had seen ...” (Acts 7:44).

It is significant that the Tabernacle is described as the tabernacle *of witness*. It was designed to bear witness of certain things, and it is because of this that the Apostle describes its ordinances as “a shadow of good things to come” (Heb. 10:1). All of its construction and sacrificial system foreshadowed the work of our Redeemer, the prophet like unto Moses. Twice in the Apocalypse, he is described as “witness”:

“... *the faithful witness*, and the first begotten of the dead” (Rev. 1:5)

“... these things saith the Amen, *the faithful and true witness*, the beginning of the creation of God” (Rev. 3:14).

Jesus the Christ is the faithful and true Witness, who testified concerning His Father's purpose to form an ecclesia, or *assembly* of called-out ones for the glory of His Name. Israel were an ecclesia – called out from Egypt – and we likewise have been called to separation from the things of the world, all of which shall pass away with the appearing of the Son of the Most High. In that day, when the kingdoms of this world shall become kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, the faithful will no longer be a despised minority. Our Master is supremely the One who heard his Father's voice, and it is he that we need to be joined to in faith, after the pattern of Joshua and Caleb. We have before us such a glorious hope, that we shall be brought to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light, and we therefore, must hold fast our faith during our wilderness journey, that we might be granted our promised inheritance when our Master returns again.

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