Jeremiah 31:2 (H) 70713

Bible Treasury: Volume N4, Grace in the Wilderness (31:2)

Jer. 31:2

We are all familiar with the third verse of Jer. 31 with its precious assurance of the everlasting love of our God, but is there not a wonderful depth of meaning in the preceding verse, which will well repay searching out in our small measure?

“Thus saith Jehovah, The people left of the sword found grace in the wilderness: even Israel, when I went to cause him to rest.”

In that night of terror when Jehovah passed through the land of Egypt to smite the first-born of the Egyptians, His own people were spared on account of the blood of the lamb sprinkled on their doorposts. “When I see the blood, I will pass over you” was Jehovah's promise and the sword of the destroyer was not allowed to fall upon one of them: the weakest and the worst were as safe as the strongest and the best, because they were under the shelter of the blood which typified that of the “Lamb without blemish and without spot.”

They were a “people left of the sword” of divine judgment.

Again, when Jehovah had led them out of the house of bondage, and brought them to the shore of the Red Sea, and when, on looking back, they saw the host of Pharaoh behind them, and cried out in faithless fear, He did not forsake them. He divided the sea before them, so that its dreaded waters were “a wall unto them,” and they marched through dryshod. Their enemies were overwhelmed in the depths of the sea; but God's people stood on the further shore, and sung a song of deliverance. Pharaoh in his arrogance had boasted, “I will draw my sword, my hand shall destroy them,” yet the same God, Who had saved them from the sword of divine judgment, saved them also from that of the enemy.

But the wilderness lay before them now. One phase of God's dealings with His people was ended: they were “left of the sword “; they were “saved” (Ex. 14:30); but what about their future? Would He leave them to their own resources now that He had delivered them from judgment and from the power of the enemy? Alas, for Israel, if He had done so! No, praised be His name!” The people that were left of the sword found grace in the wilderness.” Moses tells us that “He (Jehovah) found him (Jacob) in a desert land, and in the waste howling wilderness” (Deut. 32:10). What was to become of poor Jacob there (for it is by the name of weak and erring Jacob that he is called in this connection, not by the princely name of Israel)? Jehovah had planted Jacob on the resurrection side of death and judgment, but He had not forgotten that he had the wilderness to go through with its trials and its needs; and accordingly “He found him there.” As the blessed Savior in a later day “found” the man whom He had healed of his blindness, and revealed Himself to him, thus meeting his spiritual as well as his bodily need, so Jehovah “found” the people whom He had delivered, and proved Himself to be sufficient for their every need till they reached the promised rest. We read that, having found Jacob in the desert land, “He led (or, compassed) him about, He instructed him, He kept him as the apple of His eye.”

O what grace did not God's people find in the wilderness! Psa. 105, which tells of His mighty deeds in delivering them from their enemies, tells also how in the wilderness “the people asked, and he brought quails, and satisfied them with the bread of heaven. He opened the rock, and the waters gushed out; they ran in dry places like a river.”

Until they so readily took upon themselves the responsibilities of law-keeping, Jehovah dealt with them in pure grace. They murmured at Marah, when the water was bitter; in the wilderness of Sin they longed for the bread and the flesh-pots of Egypt; and at Rephidim also, when they had no water, He gave it out of the smitten rock, but passed over the disobedience of such as went to gather manna in vain on the sabbath.

In each case He satisfied their desires, reproving them indeed, but inflicting not the slightest punishment, rebellious though their conduct had been. After the law was given, there was a change in His dealings with them. Manna and quails and water were given as before in response to their complaints; but Jehovah manifested His displeasure by fire and plagues and fiery serpents, which destroyed their thousands. Psa. 106 tells us that God “gave them their request, but sent leanness into their souls,” and Psa. 78 that “Jehovah heard this (i.e. their murmurings), and was wroth; so a fire was kindled against Jacob, and anger also came up against Israel “; also that, “while their meat was yet in their mouths, the wrath of God came upon them, and slew the fattest of them, and smote down the chosen men of Israel.”

Still grace was mixed with law (as shown in Ex. 34:6, 7, and elsewhere), or not one of them could have entered the promised land. Surely Joshua and Caleb, the only two of the older generation who attained the goal of their journeyings, would gladly have owned that, though the former was the faithful leader of the armies of Jehovah, and the latter could truthfully speak of having “wholly followed Jehovah his God,” yet but for His sustaining and pardoning grace, they must have fallen in the wilderness like the rest.

And so it was a tale of grace from first to last: grace that delivered them from the sword, grace that sustained them in the wilderness, and grace that brought them safely into the promised rest at the end. For though they had plenty of hard fighting to do before they could settle down in the land of their inheritance, it was, after all, not their own efforts, but the grace of their God that brought them into rest: “When I went to cause him to rest,” and “Jehovah gave them rest round about” (Josh. 21:44).

Are not the three beautiful statements of our verse true of us also, and in a still more blessed way than of Israel? Our past, present, and future are all covered by the same unbounded, matchless, grace.

We have indeed been “left of the sword.” Grace has delivered us from the power of Satan, and from all fear of judgment to come, so that we can triumphantly sing:

“There is no condemnation,

There is no hell for me:

The torment and the fire

These eyes shall never see.”

Praise God that our souls are saved once and forever! And the rest lies before us, “There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God.” When our beloved Lord and Savior comes to take us home to Himself, then we shall be saved completely, body as well as soul, and conformed to His own glorious image.

But meanwhile there is the wilderness. God might have taken us home to the promised rest as soon as He had saved our souls, but He has not seen fit to do so. Meanwhile He is saving us all the journey through, our great High Priest being “able to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them” (Heb. 7:25).

Do we not indeed “find grace in the wilderness” —grace for seasonable help. It is not grace mixed with law, as in Israel's wanderings from Sinai onward; “for ye are not under law, but under grace” (Rom. 6:14). It far transcends even the grace shown to Israel before the law was given; for it is grace founded upon that infinite Sacrifice of which the paschal lamb was but a feeble type.

Grace first provided the Sacrifice (foreknown before the world's foundation); and now in consequence of that Sacrifice, it can freely flow out to the vilest of sinners and the most needy of saints. It is grace too ensured to us by relationship; for “Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called children of God” (1 John 3:1). Surely as “children” we can the more count upon grace for every step of the way till we reach our Father's house.

The path is often steep and rugged, and the desert sands hard to plod through; but do not let us be tempted to leave them for a smoother path and pleasant lawns. It is “in the wilderness” we shall “find grace “; it is not promised us for “Bypath Meadow.” There are resources in our God to meet every difficulty. Nay, the greater the trial the greater the grace ready for us. “He giveth more grace” or, as the margin of the R.V. reads, “a greater grace” (James 4:6).

H.

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