

An old Sufi tale tells of a **little stream** that wanted to cross the desert, but each time it tried, it would be **swallowed up** in the hot desert sand. After several **failed attempts**, the stream heard a reassuring voice that it **could** make it across.

“How?” the stream asked, and the voice explained it had to quit trying to cross in the **customary** way, because that way caused streams to **disappear** or turn into a **marsh**. Instead, the stream had to **allow the wind to carry it** to its destination. The

stream had to **lose itself in the wind**; it had to be **fully trust** the wind and **allow** itself to be **absorbed** into it. Then, the wind would make it safely over to the other side, where it would fall down as rain and become a little stream once again. The stream had to be **fully committed** and **trust** the **wind** in order to make it to its destination.¹

In the same way, Israel had to give up customary ways of thinking and living, and become fully committed to and trust in God’s leading in order to make it to the Promised Land; but they had extreme trouble doing so. They kept grumbling, testing God, and falsely blaming Moses.

We need to make sure we do have their attitude, but instead allow ourselves to be fully identified with and trust in God. So then, let us study these texts about striking the rock. Let us notice: the **place** of refreshment; the **person** through whom salvation comes; the **type** pointing to the coming savior; and the **lessons** we need to learn for salvation.



The place for refreshment was Rephidim, “Resting Places.” It was where **God, not Moses**, had led them, but it seemed like an **inappropriate** spot to become **refreshed**. The people could not see any available water. Water was there, but they didn’t know about it. They thought an appropriate resting place would be an oasis with shade, dates, water, and game. They wanted rest, relaxation, and recuperation in the **customary** way, and thought that because they could **not** see what they wanted they wouldn’t find **rest**, but rather, **death**.

If the people were wiser and more spiritual, they could have settled down and looked around, and possibly heard the water behind the rock, or seen moisture oozing from it. Or they could have asked God for help, and he would have provided. They did neither. Instead they **quarreled** with Moses, that is, they **brought up charges** against him, charges that could lead to stoning.

The charge, though, ascribed false motives to Moses: “**Moses** has brought us here to make us, our children, and our livestock die of thirst!” They ignored the fact that Moses and all the people were following **God’s** leading. All of them followed the pillar of smoke and fire. But they conveniently forgot that, and blamed everything on Moses. If they were going to die, they were going to make sure Moses would die as well.

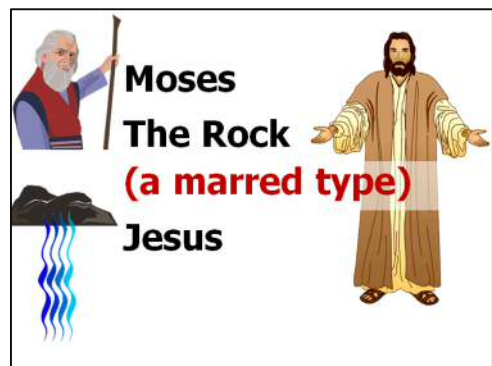
We do something similar. When **we** face difficulties, we often falsely think that there is no help available and that it will be the death of us. **We** too often ascribe evil false motives behind people’s actions. **We** forget that God **can be found** in the desert. In fact, God sometimes brings us into difficult circumstances in order to **strengthen** our **faith** and **draw** us **closer** to him.

Psalm 23 comforts us, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” Yet that does not mean we will not face difficulties, because the psalm continues by noting **God** leads us “through the valley of the shadow of death,” and prepares a table for us in the presence of our enemies.

The Apostle Paul recognized difficulties and problems could be from God. He had a “thorn in the flesh” that was not taken away so that he would remain dependent upon God, and so that he could see God work through his weaknesses.

Danger, difficulties, and dependency are strange places to find rest, nourishment, and strength, but that is often the case. Thus James instructs us to leap for joy when we face any kind of trial, because that will test our faith and result in endurance and maturity.

Just like it is unlikely for people to think the dry, harsh and lonely desert is a good destination for revitalization, so also it is unlikely so also it is unlikely for people to think a crucified criminal can provide inspiration and help, but that is exactly what God did in Jesus.



This brings us to the next two points: the **person** through whom salvation comes, and the **type** pointing to the coming savior. They go together, hand in hand. We know God is the One who actually saves, but God usually works through **people**, even when he provides miracles, as he did here working through Moses. Yet the stress is on God providing water through the **Rock** that was **struck** by Moses.

Moses struck the rock and saving waters flowed. Now this, in and of itself is not miraculous. There have been other accounts of water pooling within sedimentary rock, and people striking it to get water out of the rock. What would be miraculous, though, would be that enough water flowed to satisfy all the people and animals.

“**Rock**” in scripture often refers to God, emphasizing God’s trustworthiness and protection. Striking the rock established a type of a coming savior who would be struck in order to give life-saving help to the people. A person would come who would be mistreated and abused, yet would save the people from calamity. Moses himself predicted that another deliverer and law giver would come, and when that person arrived people were supposed to listen to and follow him.

Isaiah predicted the Savior of Israel would be a suffering servant. “Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed” (Isaiah 53:4–5, NIV).

Similarly, Zechariah 13: 7–9 predicted that the man who was close to God, would be struck down, and the sheep would be scattered, but a remnant would be purified, and become the people of God. And as followers of Jesus, the crucified Messiah, we see The Rock as Jesus, who was struck down by the Jewish leaders which resulted in the out-pouring of the Holy Spirit and salvation by grace through faith in Jesus.

This is what Paul means in our text from 1 Corinthians this morning. He is alluding to two different stories in scripture, the one we read this morning and also Numbers 20. Right before the people entered into the Promised Land, the people camped at a barren site, and once again, they grumbled and were ready to kill both Moses and Aaron. “Why come here? There is no grain, figs, vine, pomegranates, or water. It would have been better to stay in Egypt than to die without water.”

Moses and Aaron responded to their threats by going to the Tabernacle and asking God what to do. God told them to gather the congregation, take the staff, and go *speak* to the rock, and then the rock would produce water.

But that is **not** what Moses did. **Instead** of being **gracious**, he demonstrated **anger**. He **lectured** the people, and **then struck** the rock **twice** with his staff. He **broke** the expressed **command** of God; he **acted contrary** to the patience and grace of God; and he greatly **marred** the **type** that pointed to Jesus as the Suffering Servant, who would be struck down once for the sins of the people.

And thus, as punishment, Moses would die, and not enter into the Promised Land with the people. God is holy, and demands that we **obey** him, and **act** according to **his commands, character** and **values**, **not** according to our **feelings** and **tempers**.

Grace guides God and us
Acting contrary to God's ways
disrupts our enjoyment in life
God is in every situation
Ascribing false motives and
fighting God's leaders are wrong
We must be fully identified
with Jesus

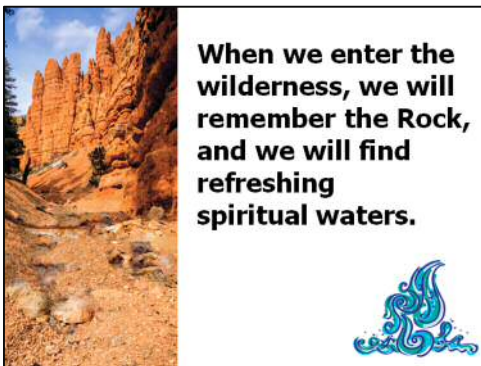
So then, let me highlight **five lessons** from these verses about striking the rock. **First**, and foremost, we learn that God is **patient**, “**compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in love**” (Ps 103:8). God is gracious and wants us to be the same. God wants his revelation to control us, not our own emotions, aspirations, and circumstances.

Second, when we directly **disobey** God, and **act contrary** to God's character, values, and purposes, we will be **kept from enjoying a full life** on earth.

Third, God is **in every situation**. We may not *initially* think God is **present** or **can help** us, **but** God is there and will help us if we ask, and seek out and use the resources he has given us. Salvation and refreshment can be found in the desert.

Fourth, we are not to ascribe **false motives** to others and **fight against** God's chosen leaders.

Fifth, we must be **fully identified** with and trust in Jesus to make it to the Promised Land. Only those people who trusted, followed, supported, and obeyed Moses made it to the Promised Land. As Paul said, being part of the community of faith and being baptized do not guarantee our salvation. Unless we know Jesus and are allowing Jesus to change and direct our lives, church membership, sacraments, and religious experiences will count for nothing.



So then, when we find that we have entered into the wilderness, we will **remember the Rock**. We will remember the grace, love, and presence of the holy and almighty God can be found in the midst of fearful and difficult circumstances. God will help us if we stay true to the character and values of Jesus, **ask** for God's help, **look** for and **use** the **resources available** to us, and listen to the leaders God has given to us.

Then we will find refreshing spiritual waters of life wherever we are. We will find nourishment, strength, encouragement, and hope even in the midst of uninviting and seemingly unlikely circumstances.

We will remember The Rock that was struck, and we will find life-giving and life-enhancing spiritual water. “O Lord, so help us. Amen.”

¹ Adapted from Dieter T. Hessel, *For Creation's Sake: Preaching Ecology and Justice* (Philadelphia: Geneva Press, 1985) 53, taken from homilecticsonline.com.