

Aaron's Staff

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[0 : 00] Let us now turn to the passage that we read. The book of Numbers, chapter 17, and we may read again at verse 8.

On the next day, Moses went into the tent of the testimony, and behold, the staff of Aaron for the house of Levi had sprouted and put forth buds and produced blossoms, and it bore ripe almonds. Behold, the staff of Aaron had sprouted, put forth buds, and produced blossoms, and it bore ripe almonds.

This morning, we noted how the Lord was able to turn an apparent hopeless situation right around in the healing of the man with the withered hand, an act of divine mercy on the part of Jesus that demonstrated, among other things, the notable lack of mercy in the hearts of men, as illustrated by the attitude of the Pharisees.

This evening, I should like for a few moments to reflect on how divine encouragement was given from what initially may appear to have been a most unlikely source.

[1 : 45] The passage that we read together, in my view, speaks of one of the most astonishing events in the Old Testament.

Although our text highlights an astonishing moment, it is mainly, I believe, a message of encouragement to Aaron and Moses in the first instance, but also to every person who trusts in Jesus Christ alone for salvation.

Moses and Aaron, you may remember, had been ruthlessly challenged by recent events. Many among Israel envied the special relationship that Moses had with the Lord, and also Aaron, who occupied a special position.

In Hebrew, Aaron is called the Lord's Holy One. To challenge the authority of Moses and Aaron was, in effect, to challenge the Lord's own authority.

Moses' authority, you may remember as leader, had been questioned. Opponents had accused him of abject failure in bringing the people out of Egypt to die in the desert.

[3 : 16] Is it a small thing, they said, that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey to kill us in the wilderness? That wasn't the view.

that they had of Egypt. But isn't it amazing what rose-tinted spectacles will do when you look back and you forget what they had suffered?

That's what they were asking. And then there was the accusation of rigid authoritarianism leveled against Moses, that you must also make yourself a prince over us.

And so the griping went on. Moreover, you have not brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey, nor given us an inheritance of fields and vineyards.

And those who led the act of rebellion perished in a judgmental act of God. The earth opened its mouth, swallowed them up with their households and all the people who belonged to Korah and all their goods.

[4 : 25] So they and all that belonged to them went down alive into Sheol. And the earth closed over them, and they perished from the midst of the assembly. And all Israel who were around them fled at that cry, for they said, Lest the earth swallow us up.

And fire came out from the Lord and consumed the 250 men offering the incense. You might have thought that would have silenced and stopped the griping and the grumbling, but it didn't.

Those who were challenging the positions of Moses as prophet and Aaron as high priest continued. What had begun as an envious thought in the mind of Korah and resentful rebellion in the minds of Dathan and Abiram spread like wildfire.

And the charge that was being leveled against Moses and Aaron after this punish, this judgmental act of God, and it only took a day, on the next day, all the congregation of the people of Israel

grumbled against Moses and against Aaron, saying, You have killed the people of the Lord. And again, as a people, they suffered as God announced that He would consume the people. An unidentified plague began to sweep through them.

[5 : 58] Moses commanded Aaron to put fire from the altar and a censer, put incense on it, and make atonement for the people. Intriguingly, there was no animal sacrifice, no shedding of blood.

It's as if Aaron himself was the sacrifice. He stood between the living and the dead, mediating between God and sinners.

Only the atonement provided and the intercession of Aaron prevented further anguish and destruction as the Lord exercised mercy.

He stood between the dead and the living and the plague was stopped. These are all that information in the previous chapter. The people were dropping all over the place as Aaron stepped between them and God to plead God's mercy on their behalf.

It's as if Aaron were stating, Death and judgment, you must march over me and my atonement. You must smite God's high priest and ignore God's atonement if you continue to destroy the people.

[7 : 22] How Christlike on the part of Aaron. Because Aaron's intervention points forward to the one and only real Savior who died in the place of sinners and rose again.

He saves to the uttermost all who come to God through him. Let us not forget that wrath and judgment have a claim on us too.

Justice is ready to smite the sheep. But there stands Christ, the great high priest, the mediator between the sheep and the justice of God.

And what in effect he says is, You must walk over me and ignore my blood to destroy my sheep. But even after the intervention and intercession of Aaron, many people died as a result of that plague.

Now those who died in the plague were 14,700 besides those who died in the affair of Korah.

[8 : 36] So at the beginning of this chapter that we read together, the Lord assures Moses that he was God's appointed prophet.

Nothing is said about any doubt being in the mind of Moses as to his position. But if there was, here was divine assurance to dispel any doubts that might have arisen.

It was also further confirmation that he was still God's prophet, God's spokesman. The Lord, that's the first words of the chapter we read, the Lord spoke to Moses, say, Speak to the people of Israel. Despite the traumatic events recorded in the previous chapter, the Lord continued to address the people through Moses.

That's significant. He, in effect, was saying, This is still my choice. As the Bible reminds us in the words of the psalmist, The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

[9 : 54] He will not always child, nor would he keep his anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.

Here is God speaking to this rebellious people through his servant Moses. As one hymn writer expresses it, Marvelous grace of our loving Lord, grace that exceeds our sin and our guilt, yonder on Calvary's mount outpoured, there where the blood of the Lamb was spilled.

However, I think it prudent to issue a note of warning at this point. Be a huge mistake and extremely foolish of anyone to assume that one can play on that marvellous truth that I quoted from the psalm and behave as one might wish.

God is long-suffering, but he is not all-suffering. God cannot be ambivalent about our sin. He is a holy God.

Sin is an affront to God. His holy character requires him to judge our sin. If he refused to do so, he would be denying himself, compromising his own perfect character, and this he cannot do.

[11 : 20] So, three thoughts from our text. First of all, a test ordered and the promise fulfilled. Secondly, God can do the impossible.

And thirdly, a people authenticated. First, a test ordered and fulfilled. The test was this.

Each of the leaders of the twelve tribes were to write their names on a staff. Aaron's name was placed on a staff representing the tribe of Levi, the tribe, as you know, from which the priesthood were chosen.

All twelve staffs were to be placed in the tent of meeting and left overnight. The instruction given to Moses was, the staff of the man whom I choose shall sprout.

Thus I will make to cease from me the grumbings of the people of Israel which they grumble against you. The test was ordered by God, not by Moses nor by Aaron.

[12:34] The test was designed to silence the grumbling with regard to the role and status of Aaron as high priest. Moses obeyed the injunction he received from God.

He deposited the staffs before the Lord in the tent of the testimony and on the next day Moses went into the tent of the testimony. If the record were stopped there and the question was asked, write down what you think happened next.

How do you think you would have responded? In my view, your response would be governed by your view of God.

By that I mean do you believe that God always fulfills what he says and promises? If you answer that you do believe God always fulfills his promises and you are still a non-believer, perhaps you might care to explain to yourself why you have not trusted in Jesus Christ alone for salvation.

Bible tells us there is salvation in no one else for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews states, therefore we must pay closer attention to what we have heard lest we drift away from it.

[14:14] For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution. How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?

It was declared at first by the Lord, it was attested to us by those who heard, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, distributed according to his will.

There is much, much there for us all to reflect on with regard to our view of God and the necessity of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

However, the record has not been stopped and we are told of the sight that greeted Moses on that particular day in the tent of testimony.

What a sight it was. Behold, says the writer, the staff of Aaron for the house of Levi had sprouted, put forth buds, produced blossoms and had bore ripe almonds.

[15:28] It would have been impressive enough if that dead stick, the staff with Aaron's name, had just sprouted.

But in one night, in one night, it also produced ripe almonds. How unlikely that must have appeared to the human mind.

Many, I'm quite sure, would have been inclined to dismiss the test, to dismiss even the possibility of a staff sprouting.

Dead sticks just don't sprout and blossom. Impossible, but not with God. Remember what God had said, the staff of the man whom I choose shall sprout.

What was the promise that God gave? Whatever God decrees must inevitably come to pass.

Shorter catechism should help in that context.

[16:37] Remember how the Shorter catechism asks the question, what are the decrees of God? Decrees of God are His eternal purpose according to the counsel of His will, whereby for His own glory He hath foreordained whatsoever comes to pass.

Faithful is the God who has promised. The staff blossoming was decreed by God and in blossoming it gave categoric confirmation that Aaron was indeed God's choice as high priest.

And as the New Testament emphasizes, no one takes this honor for himself but only when called by God just as Aaron was.

There is something else that is deserving of note regarding this miracle. Something that deserves our attention. The staff of Aaron for the house of Levi had sprouted, put forth buds, produced blossoms, and it bore ripe almonds.

The almond tree was called the watchful one or the alert one. And the reason that it was called in that way was that early in the season before other trees sprouted, their blossom and the buds of leaves appeared, the almond tree was the first.

[18:04] So when this staff produced blossoms and bore ripe almonds, one could read into that through this miracle the Lord was stating, I am watching, I am wakeful.

In other words, the intensity and vigilance of the divine scrutiny is being emphasized through the miracle of Aaron's staff sprouting and blossoming.

The psalmist reminds us, behold he who keeps Israel, what is true of him, he'll neither slumber nor sleep. He never goes into hibernation.

He is watching to ensure that everything he has promised comes to pass, that his word is fulfilled. And even when his word appears dormant, God's word is waiting to burst into flower. One can prevent God's promise from being fulfilled than one could keep Aaron's staff from blossoming.

[19 : 17] Remember how the fulfillment of God's word is emphasized by the Lord through the prophet Isaiah. For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there, but water the earth making it bring forth and sprout giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth.

It shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

That is the guarantee that God gives with regard to his own truth. So, whatever else we might understand from the staff blossoming, it assures us that everything that God has promised will come to pass.

Every last one of his great and precious promises will all be fulfilled. Now, let's for a moment just think of some of these promises.

There's the promise of redemption in Jesus Christ. There's the promise of forgiveness of sins. There's the promise of the water of life without price. There's the promise of the gift of the Holy Spirit.

[20 : 39] There's the promise that you will be comforted when you mourn, shown mercy when you are merciful, filled with righteousness when you hunger and thirst after it. There's the promise that God will give wisdom, the promise that God will never leave nor forsake.

And these are only for starters. There's the promise to the pure of heart that they shall see God. There is the promise that God's people will be with him. There is the promise that Jesus has gone to prepare a place in his father's house and he will come back soon and take his own people there. There is the promise that the Lord Jesus will transform the body of believers to be like his own glorious resurrection body. All of these promises are true.

Every one will be fulfilled. And the lives of all who are brought to faith in Jesus Christ. Some promises have already begun to blossom.

All will burst into full flower in the everlasting springtime of paradise. All of these promises and many more can be summarized in the words of the apostle Paul when he wrote to the Corinthians for all the promises of God find their yes in him.

[21 : 53] That is why it is through him that we utter our amen to God for his glory. A test ordered and the promise fulfilled.

The test was God ordered and God promised. Secondly, God can do the impossible. As I already stated, you don't expect dead sticks to sprout and blossom.

Impossible to our mind, but not with God. Remember what God had said, the staff of the man I choose shall sprout. Now, let's remind ourselves of some examples from the Bible of God doing the very thing that appeared impossible to the mind of man.

The first example I would quote from the book of Genesis, where we have the account of Abraham and Sarah. Sarah, a couple who stepped out in faith in response to the call of God, a couple who were childless, but who were promised that they would have family.

And when it seemed virtually impossible that that would take place, long past childbearing years, Sarah gave birth to a son, when to all intents and purposes it seemed a physical impossibility.

[23 : 29] But this God, who made Aaron's staff to bud, to blossom, is able to create life where there is death. This is how the New Testament writer describes it.

By faith, Sarah herself received power to conceive even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore, from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven, as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.

God doing the impossible. Think of another example. The nation of Israel, the nation of Judah rather, in captivity in Babylon.

How to make Judah a nation again, given the strength of Babylon, seemed a futile, forlorn hope.

But God, through the prophet Ezekiel, demonstrated that he is able to raise up an army, even from a valley of dry bones.

Judah was restored to nationhood as God had promised. Then you come into the New Testament. A young woman who was a virgin, told that she will conceive and bear a son.

[25 : 01] Again, seemingly impossible. That son, no less a person than God the Son in human nature. You remember the message she was given? Behold, you will conceive and your woman bear a son.

You shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever and of his kingdom.

There will be no end. Many may have said of that too, it's like the staff of Aaron, impossible. But nothing will be impossible with God. And now this person, born of the virgin, put to death on Calvary's cross, his lifeless body taken down and buried.

And for most, again, resurrection was not possible. It appeared to be a dead stick. Ah, but remember what happened.

[26 : 08] He was raised from the dead. You might say the dead stick was made to blossom, and oh, how it blossomed. It's the same God who is still set before us today in the Bible.

Is there not encouragement here for us too? You may be here this evening, dealing with what is a seemingly impossible, hopeless situation.

Maybe a member of your family, or a relative in the grip of addiction, or a member of your family who has become hostile towards the things of God.

They are like dead sticks, but God can make that apparent dead stick to blossom. Remember what is true this evening of every person who may be here in Christ tonight, and I stress the word every. What is true? Remember how the apostle Paul summarizes the state of every person. You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work, in the spirit, in the sons of disobedience, among whom we all, and the word all is very significant, once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

[27 : 51] In other words, we were all dead sticks. What made the difference? Was it not divine intervention?

But God, says the prophet, but God been rich in mercy because of the great love with which he loved us. Even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.

By grace you have been saved. So, if in Christ tonight, you were taken from the spiritual graveyard and raised to newness of life, what a glorious and marvelous transition.

And if true of you this evening, how indebted you are to the vast, vast resources of divine grace, resources that are inexhaustible.

And I'd like to raise two other thoughts under this heading, God can do the impossible. Most of us, if not all, have stood at one time or another, perhaps even tearfully, sorrowfully, at an open graveside.

[29 : 03] we have witnessed the burial of loved ones. And the act seems so overwhelmingly, even brutally final, doesn't it?

And remember, many thought that dead sticks don't blossom. Many are persuaded that dead people don't live.

But you know, for those who die in Christ, they are but sleeping. for there is a real sense in which they don't die.

They sleep, says the Bible, through Jesus. The God who made Aaron's staff to blossom and produce fruit. His son, Jesus Christ, will come again.

He will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God on the dead in Christ, will rise first.

[30 : 05] What a day that will be for every person in Christ. A day of glory in Him. Our deepest affections, our sublimest emotions are as nothing compared with what the believer shall experience when he or she meets the Savior face to face, but equally a day of divine dread, of everlasting dread for all out of Christ.

And my final thought under this heading is some of us remember and have participated in acts of worship where attendances in the house of God were far in excess of what we see today to our sorrow.

And the temptation is to think that the church is a dead stick. The forces of darkness appear so powerful, many today living in the grip of apathy and indifference when it comes to the salvation of their souls.

the church appears so helpless, so weak, but you know there is such a thing as revival.

And some of us have been privileged to see a level of quickening in congregations, although true it has not been seen in the recent past.

[31 : 44] Levels of quickening that pointed to the gracious work of the Holy Spirit of God. And when there is that level of quickening, God breathes life and energy into the seemingly lifeless body of His church.

Dead sticks can blossom. Israel is a nation, testimony to that. Enslaved in Egypt, there didn't appear to be any hope that things would change, but change they did.

God brought them out by His almighty power so that the psalmist could pen these words, the right hand of the Lord does valiantly, the right hand of the Lord exalts, the right hand of the Lord does valiantly.

Your own life, if you are in Christ tonight, is testimony to the fact that dead sticks do blossom. You are a dead stick, and God quickened you to life by the power of His Holy Spirit in applying the truth. God can do the impossible. Dead sticks can blossom and produce fruit. A test ordered and the promise fulfilled and finally, God vindicates His chosen.

[33 : 09] Let me state first that God vindicates Himself. He demonstrated that He had the right to choose, and that in Moses and Aaron, He had exercised that right.

And let us also remember that God also chose Christ as the High Priest. And the Bible speaks almost seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in Heaven, a minister in the holy places. He sits as one who could say, I have finished the work. He sits as a royal priest in the splendor of glory, reigning with authority and power.

Those who reject Him in this life will finally see Him vindicated as the only Lord and Savior. But I said He vindicates His chosen.

All God's people are His chosen ones. As Paul expresses it, chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world.

[34 : 26] One day they will be gathered and on that day they will shine like the brightness of the sky above. It will be clearly evident to the watching universe that day that all who trusted in Christ were wise to follow the Lord.

The psalmist paints a glowing picture of the church of Christ as the bride. All glorious is the princess in her chamber, with robes interwoven with gold, many colored robes she has led to the king, with her virgin companions following behind her.

With joy and gladness they are led along as they enter the palace of the king. The sanctified believer will bear the marks of the king's glory.

They have sanctified companions and did you note they are marked by true happiness. With joy and gladness they are led along as they enter the palace of the king.

Their joys are too numerous to catalog. But can we not say among their chief blessing is fellowship with the living Christ who is the light of the world, the bread of life, their good shepherd and divine lover of their soul.

[35 : 54] There is the final culmination of the Abrahamic promise. There will be no doubt that day who were wise and who were foolish.

The vindicated in receipt of blessing without end. The king who with authority and divine right sets one group on his right hand and the other on his left.

There are only two groupings. He says with all the authority invested in him to those on his right hand, come, you who are blessed by my father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, but the accursed will be accursed still.

Dead sticks do blossom. A test ordered and the promise fulfilled. Ordered by God, promised by God, fulfilled by God.

Can God do the impossible? Yes, he can. Does he vindicate his chosen? Yes, he does. And the question for you and I is, where shall we be on that day?

[37 : 15] The people of Israel were asking the question, are we all to perish? And the answer to the question is no, if we trust in Christ, we will not all perish.

Everyone who trusts in him shall not perish, but shall enjoy eternal life without end.

Let us pray. Oh, ever blessed Lord, the God of miracle, the God of power, God of almighty grace, grant, most merciful one, that this evening we be not strangers to the power of that grace, at work in our own lives, and the glory shall be thine.

In Jesus' name we ask it. Amen. Amen. Let us conclude by singing to God's praise from Psalm 135, that's page 425 of the Psalter.

Psalm 135, page 425, Praise ye the Lord. The Lord's name praise, his servants praise ye God, who stand in God's house, in the courts of our God make abode.

[38 : 54] Praise ye the Lord, for he is good, and to him praise us sing. Sing praises to his name, because it is a pleasant thing.

For Jacob to himself, the Lord did choose of his good pleasure, and he hath chosen Israel for his peculiar treasure, because I know assuredly the Lord is very great, and that our Lord above all gods in glory hath a seat.

Let us sing these verses in conclusion. Praise ye the Lord. Praise ye the Lord, the Lord's name, praise, his servants, praise ye God, who stand in God's house, in the courts, hope, our God, make abode.

Praise ye the Lord, for he is good, unto him praises sing.

Sing praises to his name, because it is a pleasant thing.

[40 : 42] For Jacob to himself the Lord did choose of his good pleasure, and he hath chosen Israel for his peculiar treasure, because I know assuredly the Lord is very great, and that our Lord above all God and glory hath his seed.

Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, fellowship and communion of the Holy Spirit rest on and abide with you all, now and forever.

Amen. Amen.