

God's Love is Severe and Kind

Romans 11:22

by Ernest O'Neill

If you'd been in the Sinai Peninsula about thirty-four hundred years ago—that is, about 1440 B.C. you'd have seen a wild sight: there were a half million men, women and children with their cattle and ox-carts, their dogs and chickens, wandering away from the Red Sea. In front of them was a bearded figure with a staff in his hand. They travelled for about three days and ran out of water. Immediately they turned to this fellow who had led them and they said, "What should we drink?" This man Moses called upon the maker of the world, and he told him to take a certain tree and to throw it into some water that was ahead of them. Moses wondered why he needed to do that, but it wasn't long before he realized why: he saw that some of the children had run on ahead, they were so excited at seeing the water and they had begun to lap it up. And of course, it was bitter water and they couldn't drink it. When Moses got there he threw the tree into the water; it made it sweet, and the people were able to drink the water.

They encamped at a place called Elim (Exodus 16) for the next six weeks, and then they headed out into the desert. They were hardly on the journey at all when they ran out of the food that they had brought with them. Immediately they did the same thing: they turned around to Moses and said, "Why have you brought us out into this wilderness? Why didn't you leave us in Egypt? Why have you brought us out here to kill us and our children with hunger?" Moses did the same thing as he did before, because the situation utterly overwhelmed him. There was no way he could feed all those people, so he spoke to the Creator of our world and the Creator explained to him, "Tomorrow morning, and for as long as you and the Israelites are going to be in this wilderness, when you get up you will see a fine white crust covering the earth. It will be fine, like hoarfrost.

Tell the Israelites to go out early in the morning and gather it and eat it. It is bread -- miraculous bread -- that I will provide for them as long as they are in the wilderness." That is actually what happened. They put some of it into a jar and for years they were able to keep that particular jar of manna in the temple to remind their children and their successors of what had happened in the wilderness.

Well, they went on a little further and soon it was the old cry and the old complaining again: they ran out of water again, and it was as if they never learned. (Exodus 17) They said to Moses, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt -- we were happy there. Why did you bring us into this wilderness? We are dying of thirst." It wasn't only complaining and the fault-finding, but a real questioning of the Creator who had done all these things for them. They said, "Is the Lord among us or is he not?" So Moses did the same thing as before. He didn't go out with the rod trying to divine where the water was; he just went straight to God and said, "Lord, what will I do?" And God told him, "Take the rod that you used to split the Red Sea and strike that rock over there with it." Moses struck the rock with his rod and water poured out of the rock. That is the way the Israelites eventually arrived in Canaan after forty years in the wilderness, through endless supernatural events like that.

A couple of years ago I saw a verse in the New Testament that referred to that rock event. It is I Corinthians 10:4. Paul says, "and all drank the same supernatural drink. For they drank from the supernatural Rock which followed them, and the Rock was Christ." Suddenly I realized that the rearrangement of the neutrons and the protons of that rock that was obviously necessary in order to produce water from it was actually brought about by the same Christ-life that enabled Jesus to

counteract the effects of the wounds that he received on the cross and to come back to life in the resurrection, I realized that that power-life that apparently broke into this limited time-space world about 6 B.C. had actually been in this world from the very beginning when God used it to create the world. It was this power-life that actually became manna for the Israelites; it was this power-life that affected the charges of electricity that were in the bitter water at Marah and changed it to sweet water. I began to realize that that super-life of Jesus was what changed things for the Israelites.

That creative life of God was always in the world and had always been in it and has always been creating new life that we cannot explain or understand or comprehend. That belief is absolutely opposite to the deist's belief. The deist believes in a god, but he believes that that god wound up the world like a clock; that he set it going and doesn't bother with it at all and won't bother with it until the end. This belief is utterly different from that. It is obvious that right throughout history this Christ-life has been working changes in our environment in response to one or two people's faith.

You can see why Jesus was so severe with the Jews when he came to earth not as a rock or as manna -- but in his own physical form. That's the kind of reaction you get in John 8, and you can sense in it the pre-existent, supernatural being talking in time of events that, really, are beyond time. Jesus is talking to some of the descendants of these people that he had fed and given water to in the wilderness and he said in John 8:48,52: "Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?" "The Jews said to him, 'Now we know that you have a demon,' because Jesus said in verse 51, "Truly, truly, I say to you, if any one keeps my word, he will never see death." This was a small thing to Jesus, of course, because he had never been dead; he had been alive throughout the centuries. "Then the Jews said to him, we know that you have a demon. Abraham died, as did the prophets; and you say, 'If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death.' Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you claim to be?" Jesus answered, 'If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing; it is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say that he is your God. But you have not known him." Jesus said this because he reckoned that if they ever recognized that it was his Father and himself that was dealing with them in the wilderness they would recognize him now when he came face to face with them. Verse 55, "But you have not known him; I know him. If I said, I do not know him, I should be a liar like you; but I do know him and I keep his word. Your father Abraham rejoiced that he was to see my day; he saw it and was glad.' The Jews then said to them 'You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?' Jesus said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.' So they took up stones to throw at him; but Jesus hid himself, and went out of the temple."

Jesus was severe with the Jews because of all peoples they had experienced most of his miraculous, supernatural kindness down through the centuries. So when he came face to face with them and they still wouldn't believe him, he felt there was no way in which they would ever believe in him, even if a man rose from the dead. Loved ones that was the experience that God had with Israel as a nation down through the years. It was the same in the wilderness. After the events that we talked about; the manna and the water out of the rock and the waters of Marah being changed to sweet water, we read this in Numbers 14:26: "And the Lord said to Moses and to Aaron, 'How long shall this wicked congregation murmur against me? I have heard the murmurings of the people of Israel, which they murmur against me. Say to them, 'As I live, says the Lord, what you have said in my hearing I will do to you: your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness; and of all your number, numbered from twenty years old and upward, who have murmured against me, not one shall come into the land where I swore that I would make you dwell, except Caleb the son of Jephunneh and Joshua the son of Nun. But

your little ones, who you said would become a prey, I will bring in, and they shall know the land which you have despised. But as for you, your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness.”

Loved ones that is the kind of severity that God had to show to the Israelites who had seen so much of his kindness and yet would not believe in him and would not trust him. That is a little of what the verse means that we are studying today and it runs like this: that God is kind but he is also severe. He shows his severity to those who have fallen; that is, to those who reject him, but he has shown his kindness again and again to all of us, and he will continue to do it provided we continue in his kindness. That is the kind of thing that you and I have talked about already.

The old story in Genesis puts it so clearly: it says that there is a tree of life and a tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The tree of life is Jesus' super-life that can make water come out of a rock; can make bitter water sweet, and can make food where there is none. You can either live your life trusting and depending and believing that that super-life of Christ is here and can do those things, or you can commit yourself to living by the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Do you know what that is? It is knowledge of what people have done in the past. It is the knowledge of how others have tackled this life on their own. It is the system of precedents, "What other people have done in the past, that's what I'll do." If you live by that knowledge; trusting in your own ability to tackle life and all its problems on your own, then God will be severe with you and will sever you from the tree of life the way he severed the Israelites. Loved ones that is what Richard Pryor came up against — the severity of God. He is the comedian that was free-basing cocaine—at least we think that is what he was doing. Free-basing is when they take cocaine, the impure powder that is sold on the street, and they put it into pure ether to purify it and then heat it, and while the heat is on it they breathe in the fumes. The experiment is fraught with hideous danger because you have bare, naked flame on that ether so it is a volatile situation. As far as we know from the papers, that is what happened; the thing just blew up in his face: he is fighting third degree burns and it is still a battle whether he will live or not.

Now it's not that God looked down and made that happen; but God has built into our world all kinds of natural consequences that follow when we live a non-faith life. When we live a life that is based on our knowledge or our ability to bring about certain things by shrewdness or manipulation, instead of living a life that trusts and depends on God's super Christ-life Spirit coming into us, then there are certain events that take place that show that we are severing ourselves from God's life. That is what happened.

Any of us who watch Richard Pryor as he fights for life see that life begins to come apart at the edges if you try to bring about things by your own power and ability. Now, why did he do it? By the way, about a million other Americans are free-basing cocaine at this time throughout the nation—why do they do it? Well, it is supposed to give euphoria; a freedom and exhilaration that are higher than any other experience that you can create by other drugs. That is why they are doing it. Why? It is not hard to see, really: machines dominate a lot of our lives — the sheer frustration that we feel in trying to get a company's computer to stop sending us bills that we have already paid is typical. Machines are increasingly dominating our lives. Computers are more and more running our lives and more and more of us are going to be working for computers.

Of course life itself, especially the future, is filled with fears and apprehensions of things that

we have no idea how to control, and obviously the delight and the peace and the joy that we were meant to have with our Creator has virtually disappeared from the earth. Many people can understand why Pryor and others do that, because there is no longer anything but boredom and depression and fear in this life; there is very little joy and delight in it. Do you see what we do? We can't somehow get the source relationship that creates the joy and delight, so we decide that we will try to reproduce the symptoms of that relationship. We will try to create the joy and delight in some way. That is why Pryor and thousands of others involve themselves in drugs.

Do you see, loved ones; the world is not built to go that way? That is what this verse means that we are studying. God is kind, but there is this severity that we need to see will actually operate in our lives. Romans 11:22: "Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you too will be cut off." It is strong. The Greek word for "cut off" has the same root as "severity" — you can see it in our English words "severity" and "severs". It is true that God severs those of us who will not live by his kindness: he allows things to happen in our lives that show that we are severed and in trouble.

What about us? We put Richard Pryor and the alcoholics over there, and we are the "good" people and put ourselves over here. But I wonder; is that the case? Do you think that there might be some of Jesus' life that you could receive for yourself if you would reach out to him by faith and let go of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? Do you think there is anything of the kick-happy attitude that dominates our society found in you? We all want the experience that we feel we were made for. I'd ask you this morning: do you think there could be any way in which Jesus' life could become something for you that it isn't at this moment? In other words, we say Jesus became manna for the Israelites; he became the rock out of which the water came for them. The New Testament says Jesus is made unto us our righteousness, sanctification and redemption. Could Jesus become valium to you? Instead of trying to produce the peace yourself, by your own knowledge of what will work and won't work, could you begin to exercise faith in this supernatural life that has always existed to become what valium is to you? Could Jesus, who is made unto us wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption, be made unto you tranquilizers? Could he? Could Jesus be made unto you the Playboy centerfold or the substitute for that; could Jesus be made unto you erotic escapist daydreams; could Jesus be made unto you one martini?

You begin to see that the issue isn't, "is this sinful, is this evil, are you going to go to hell?" The issue is -- is there something more beautiful of Jesus' life that you are not experiencing, and are you trying to make do with some stupid counterfeit that is actually severing you more and more from the fine life that is available to you? Loved ones, is there anything in your life of trying to get from something else the joy and delight that your dear Father who made you wants to have with you? You can see it is the getting it from something else that is the problem. Actually it is not the martini, it is not 27 martinis -- if you can drink that many -- that is not the problem. It is the very attitude that is contorting and perverting you inside, so that you are receiving a counterfeit for what can come from Christ himself to you, if you will do what this Moses did: instead of looking up his little book on "How to Find Water in The Desert", he turned to his God and said, "Lord, I believe that you can be to me whatever I need at this moment. Lord, will you be? I exercise faith in you to be." Loved ones, it would change our lives.

Do you realize that there are many of us here that will die years earlier than we need to because we depend on ourselves? I know a man who runs ten miles a day -- many of us don't run ten miles a day -- but some of us swim, or walk, or do other things. But all of us are faced with the same thing in

the morning when the question comes: do you get up and go out and do it, or do you not? Every one of us has the same choice: do we say, "No, I feel deadly this morning" (and of course, the reason you feel deadly this morning is because you didn't get up yesterday morning or the morning before) "I feel deadly this morning: I could not walk half a mile -- I could not run at all. No -- I'll just lie here and wait until I absolutely have to hit the road, and then I'll go." Or do you say, "Lord, I don't have the strength to do this! I just don't! I don't feel like doing it. Lord Jesus, will you be life to me now? Will you be strength to me? I'll get up out of bed if you will give me your strength to get up and do it." Do you realize that you would be able to do it? And not only that, but as you did that day after day, the very habits of your body would change and you would live longer -- and that is just one little example, loved ones.

The truth is, our lives were not meant to be lived by our own knowledge and ability. The very reason you find yourself baffled at times is because God has arranged it that way. God is always asking you to stretch a little beyond what you are capable of yourself, because that supernatural life that has never left the universe is here, available for you this very day. You can actually live by it. You can actually exercise faith in it. You can. I'd just point out the fact that all of us know fine well that you have experienced this repeatedly. In a way we are not much different from the Israelites: there have been times when you have been so bereaved that you could get comfort from nobody but the one who could give you real comfort, and you got comfort from God at that time. You got strange peace, incredible peace, over the time of the funeral and through those days afterwards. You know there have been times when you have been so defeated, so disappointed over exam results or over a job situation, so worried and anxious about your finances that there have been nobody's arms to sink into but one, and you have sunk into those arm. While you stayed in them and refused to get where you were going yourself with your own abilities, you did have peace and a strange order began to come into your life and loved ones that always happens when you depend on the tree of life. The interesting thing is that just as with the loved ones in the wilderness, God right up to the very moment of your death will keep giving you this opportunity.

But it is true that the more you refuse it and the more you live by your own knowledge, the more God's severity begins to operate in your life and the more you are severed from the only life that makes life possible -- the life of Jesus' Spirit.

Loved ones, would you do what I asked you to consider doing last Sunday: would you start exercising faith in Jesus' life? Would you see that you are no different from the rest of us? We are all a pretty miserable, creepy crowd of little finite insects, and you are no different than the rest of us. We are all capable of very little on our own except that some of us achieve miracles because we believe that. We have stopped living off our own abilities and we have started to tackle life as if this Christ-life would become real to us the moment we exercised faith in it. Loved ones, I'd ask you; would you stop trying to be God and let God's life begin to lift your own life to a new level.

If you do, this time next week you'll have done things you never thought you were capable of. Most of us are missing a lot of the fun and excitement in life because we are coming up to things we say we can't do -- of course we can't do them! But we can do them with him, and if we would go on and do it, we would find ourselves on a new level of existence. So it can change us!

I'd ask you to remember to pray for Richard Pryor and to ask yourself, "Am I a little the same way? Which way am I moving: towards the tree of the knowledge of good and evil or towards the tree of life?" Let us pray.

Dear Father, we can all think of a thousand things which we've tried to tackle by our own strength and Lord we can see that we run a closed universe: we live as if there's a closed Heaven instead of

an open Heaven. Lord, we know it doesn't make any sense; we can't really explain where the rain comes from and the water vapor and yet we receive the benefit day by day. Lord we do see that your supernatural life produced physical matter that changes in the physical environment in the Old Testament – Lord we believe your life can do the same for us. So Lord Jesus, we would begin to live this life exercising faith in you. And we would believe that your life is able – ours may not be – but your life is able, and we would begin to exercise positive faith in you to move the protons and the neutrons in the rocks and the water around us and make them living life for us.

We commit ourselves to living this way Lord Jesus because this is the way you meant us to live and we're sorry that we've lived such limited, boring lives up to this point. We intend to live by faith and not by sight. Now the grace of our Lord Jesus, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us now and evermore. Amen.