

Changing Bitter Waters to Sweet

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So Moses brought Israel from the Red Sea, and they went out into the wilderness of Shur; and they went three days in the wilderness, and found no water. And when they came to Marah, they could not drink of the waters of Marah, for they were bitter; therefore the name of it was called Marah. And the people murmured against Moses, saying, What shall we drink? And he cried unto the LORD; and the LORD showed him a tree, which when he had cast into the waters, the waters were made sweet.... (Exodus 15:22–25)

This remarkable experience of the people of Israel is our subject, but to get into the water I want to use a springboard, and it's over in the letter which the apostle Paul sent to Christians in Corinth. It is this statement:

Now all these things happened unto them for examples, and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages are come. (1 Corinthians 10:11)

After reciting how God provided both food and drink for Israel during their long trek through the wilderness, Paul makes a surprising declaration. He says that their experiences were recorded for us! Why? They are examples for you and me as we walk the pilgrim pathway through the wilderness of this world. And then he gives us an admonition in the next verse:

Wherefore, let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall. (1 Corinthians 10:12)

Now what the children of Israel experienced while going through the wilderness corresponds to our Christian experience. You can translate what happened to them over to the lives of believers today. We can expect to encounter the same problems and expect the same solutions to work for us. Every believer is going to experience his own particular version of what happened to these people in the wilderness.

Recorded here are seven definite experiences that the people of Israel encountered as they journeyed from the Red Sea to Mount Sinai. In this message we will look at three of them. And these are common experiences of Christians, experiences that are shared by all of us.

Now I do not believe that *any* child of God can escape going through any of these experiences. They come normally and naturally into our lives. Therefore it will be profitable for you and me to follow the children of Israel for just a little way into the wilderness. I think we shall learn something by so doing.

When they crossed the Red Sea, they crossed as a redeemed people. I would emphasize that, because something we need to understand is that God had redeemed them by blood and by power out of the land of Egypt. And when they had crossed over the Red Sea and come safely to the other side, they sang the song of Moses. Up to that point they murmured and complained—they actually wanted to go back into Egypt, back to the brickyards. But then God marvelously and miraculously opened the Red Sea—due to the faith of Moses—and they crossed over.

Then these people believed, they entered the wilderness by faith, and they could sing the song of Moses. Let me lift out only a couple of verses to show that they were a redeemed people and understood this fact.

The LORD is my strength and song, and he is become my salvation; he is my God, and I will prepare him an habitation; my father's God, and I will exalt him. (Exodus 15:2)

Having crossed the Red Sea, they could say: “God is my salvation.” They were a saved people, if you please.

Thou in thy mercy hast led forth the people whom thou hast redeemed; thou hast guided them in thy strength unto thy holy habitation. (Exodus 15:13)

They are calling themselves a redeemed people, saved and redeemed. They have crossed the Red Sea and are singing as a redeemed people.

It's interesting that as you go through the Word of God you will find that only redeemed people sing—I mean sing praise to God with joy, and sing from the heart. Anybody can sing the blues, but to sing from the heart with joy you must be a redeemed person. So they began their march through the wilderness with a song and great joy.

How inexpressibly wonderful this was! All their lives they had been slaves in the land of Egypt, without a ray of hope on the horizon that they would ever be free. They were born into the brickyards of Egypt, and they would stay there until death. There was no hope, not a flicker of hope.

Then something wonderful happened! Moses appeared back in the land of Egypt and said, “God has sent me.” And through the plagues of judgment upon Egypt, God brought these people out, redeeming them by blood on that night of the Passover and by power at the Red Sea when they crossed over.

Imagine ... now this tremendous company of people start through the wilderness, and they don't have to go back into the brickyards to make brick. No longer will they feel the lash of the taskmaster. No longer will they groan under the burdens of Egypt. They are free! And they sing a song of redemption. Read all of their song in Exodus 15. It's wonderful!

But then they were confronted with their first wilderness experience.

No Water

So Moses brought Israel from the Red Sea, and they went out into the wilderness of Shur; and they went three days in the wilderness, and found no water. (Exodus 15:22)

Now that's bad, isn't it? Here is a redeemed people and they start out through the wilderness according to God's instruction. They go three days without finding water. And they are crossing an arid and bleak wasteland, a desert that's as dry as anything in Arizona or California. It's *bad*, if you please.

Moses came to know that wilderness well. After living in it for forty years keeping sheep for his father-in-law, he spent another forty years there with the people of Israel! Eighty years in a wilderness puts a man in the position of being an authority, and near the end of those years this is the way Moses labeled the place in the Book of Deuteronomy: “that great and *terrible* wilderness” (1:19). And again in 32:10, “the waste, howling wilderness!” That's what it was.

Lack of water was one of their biggest problems—if God had not provided for them, they would have perished.

They traveled for three days and all of their supply was exhausted. I'm sure that most of the families had a little jug or a little canteen filled with water which they had brought out with them from the land of Egypt. But it's all gone now. And oh, they have a vehement craving for something to drink. They're parched, they're desperate—three days and no water.

But Why?

Now, my beloved, their experience is contrary to the accepted notion which people have even today of how life should be for the child of God. Here is the way it would have happened if you were reading a fairy tale: Every thorn on every cactus in that wilderness would be taken off. Every sharp stone would be removed from their pathway. The mountains would be smoothed out and the valleys would be filled in, and God's chosen people would go through the wilderness with no problems, no difficulties, no hardships—not a care, not a burden, not a sigh nor a tear.

Isn't that the way we hear some people present the Christian life today? According to them, if you have become a Christian you have solved all your problems and all your difficulties, and from here on, brother, it's easy sailing.

But the moment the children of Israel were redeemed and got on the other side of the Red Sea, they were faced with bigger problems than they ever had in the land of Egypt.

There was a certain freedom in slavery. And you know there is a certain slavery in freedom. After all, in Egypt they didn't worry about where they lived, they didn't worry about what they ate, they didn't worry about their drink, because the man who owned them took care of that.

May I say, friend, any kind of a welfare state will eventually make a slave of the individual. America is today moving rapidly toward becoming a welfare state. And a great many are not even conscious of what is really taking place right now in this land of ours. We are losing our liberties on every hand. The minute somebody else takes charge of you, that very moment you lose your liberty and you become a slave.

New Thirst

Egypt was called the breadbasket of the ancient world. That was the reason the patriarch Jacob and his sons moved down there in the first place. The famine was throughout the world in their day, and they went down to Egypt because that was the only place where they could get grain.

In the land of Egypt there was water and there was grain in abundance. Egypt did not have to depend on rainfall, they depended on the river Nile—they even worshiped it! It overflowed its banks every spring and there was water in abundance. In Egypt you could fill your teakettle anytime you wanted to. But for the people of Israel out there on that torrid desert, the cisterns of Egypt are far behind them, and suddenly their source of supply is cut off. They find themselves under different circumstances. In the wilderness there is always a scarcity of water, and it's a long way from one oasis to another oasis. They have not yet found the fountain of living waters. It will take them a little while to do that.

The interesting thing is, they are having a legitimate experience. It was normal and natural—certainly there is nothing wrong with thirsting. And they are not out there in that wilderness

because of some sin in their lives, and they are not out of the will of God. They are very much *in* the will of God—and yet they went three days thirsty. You explain that.

May I say to you, the Bible is a mirror for every child of God to look into. Paul said, “All these things happened unto them for examples unto us.” There are a thousand other experiences that Moses could have recorded. He recorded only seven because they are examples for us. My, we ought to learn the lessons because this thirsting is the experience of every born-again child of God.

If you are a child of God, am I not now describing your experience? After you were redeemed—after that time you came to Christ and you received Him as Savior and things became different—didn’t you find that the cisterns of Egypt failed to satisfy you? Isn’t that what happened? Remember how, right after you were saved, you attempted to continue in the same lifestyle and it didn’t work, it didn’t satisfy. Wasn’t that your experience?

Then there was that period of soul-thirst, a yearning and a passion for the things of God. At first you had trouble finding satisfaction—perhaps still you have not found it. Sooner or later, though, if you are a child of God you are going to find where the fountain is.

I remember that many of those who were saved years ago when Billy Graham had his first campaign here in Los Angeles went into liberal churches. One man told me, “I went to a dozen churches!” He was saved but he knew almost nothing about the Bible. And you talk about going three days in the wilderness without water, this man almost died of thirst! Then somebody, out of a clear blue sky, said, “Why don’t you go down to the Church of the Open Door in Los Angeles? That preacher down there is a rank fundamentalist.” But this man came anyway and stayed because he was thirsty, and he found the water of the Word here.

The apostle Paul said after he was converted, “What things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ ... and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus, my Lord...” Then he goes on to reveal his great longing and thirst: “That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings ...” (Philippians 3:7, 8, 10). In other words, Paul said, “When I came to Christ it revolutionized my bookkeeping system—what was loss became gain, and what was gain became loss. It turned me inside out and upside down and right side up. Oh, that I might *know* Him.” How thirsty he was to know his Lord better!

And Simon Peter, when many other of the Lord’s disciples left Him and the Lord asked him if he would leave also, Simon Peter replied, “Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life” (John 6:68).

Later Peter wrote, “As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word ...” (1 Peter 2:2). Have you ever seen a little one in a crib when Mother gets the formula ready and then puts it in the bottle and holds it up? If you have ever seen perpetual motion, that is it. There’s not a muscle in that little body that isn’t moving: hands, feet, mouth, eyes—everything is saying, “Give it to me!”

There was a convention of doctors here in Los Angeles some time back, and one of them called me and said, “Can I have lunch with you on Thursday?” I had talked with him before; he was saved about three years earlier. He held a doctor’s degree, but spiritually he was a babe. So we went down to the Biltmore Hotel, and after we sat down and ordered, he said, “I want to tell you my experience.” My, was he thirsty! Believe me, friend, he knew what it was to go three days in the wilderness without water.

Our Lord spoke to the woman of Samaria about this matter:

Jesus answered, and said unto her, Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again; but whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst, but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life. The woman saith unto him, Sir, give me this water.... (John 4:13–15)

She was thirsty.

Our Lord stood on that great day of the feast in the temple and said, “If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink” (John 7:37).

While I was pastor of Church of the Open Door we had a Thursday night Bible Study that was very successful because of the fact that we had so many people there who were thirsty—the new converts. I enjoyed teaching them. The old saints—well, they had been filled up and nothing was running out, I guess. But the new ones, they were so thirsty! A couple told me one night, “We drive fifty miles every Thursday night, and we can hardly wait from one Thursday night to another.” A lot of folk, though, had no trouble waiting. Our Lord said, “Blessed are they who do hunger and thirst after righteousness; for they shall be filled” (Matthew 5:6). I believe that thirsting is the experience of every new believer who goes three days in the wilderness without water.

And, my friend, it might be well to go back to the Red Sea to determine if you really crossed it, to see whether you are redeemed. If you are God’s child, you can’t go through the wilderness of this world without water and not get thirsty.

This is the first lesson we are to learn from Israel’s wilderness experience.

Bitter Water

I come now to the second experience. Note it very carefully:

And when they came to Marah, they could not drink of the waters of Marah, for they were bitter; therefore the name of it was called Marah. (Exodus 15:23)

Marah means “bitter.” If you have read the story of the Manley party that first came into California’s Death Valley, you will remember how frightened they were when they got down into that valley and found only bitter water which they could not drink. They immediately sent scouts out of that valley to try to find good water.

When the people of Israel (there are more than two million of them at this time) come to Marah the water is bitter and they cannot drink it. Remember—oh, keep remembering—that they are redeemed people. They are on the line of march. God had marked their route on the map, and they are following it. They are not out of the will of God. They are at Marah because God sent them to Marah.

And will you listen to me very carefully: Bitter experiences come to the child of God after conversion. I do not know how to explain it, but I know it happens. It is puzzling and perplexing. How many times have you heard this from a new convert, “Why does God let this happen to me?”

The apostle Peter, who knew something about suffering, said,

Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to test you, as though some strange thing happened unto you. (1 Peter 4:12)

He didn't write as if something was *going* to happen; he wrote it in the present tense. He said that it *is* happening to you new converts. You *are* having trouble. Trials *do* come to a new convert.

Now I can't explain it, but I can give this word of comfort: God is not punishing you, and you don't need to ask, "Why does God let this happen to me?" God is educating you, God is preparing you for something. In the pathway of every believer there is a Marah. Have you come to yours yet? If you haven't, it's out there ahead of you. Many of you have been there. Some of you are there right now.

But I have good news for you—Marah is merely a camping ground. It isn't suburbia, it isn't a place to live—it's merely a camping ground. God brings you to Marah, but He won't leave you at Marah. But let me say again, He will bring you there. In the pathway of every believer there is Marah, bitterness.

While at my first pastorate in Nashville, Tennessee, I was holding meetings in a little place I'm sure you've never heard of named Woodbury. It's in the hills of middle Tennessee, and it's a county seat.

There was an elder in that church, a doctor. I learned to love that man. He and I hunted squirrels together many times.

One night after I had spoken on the passage where our Lord sends the disciples out into a storm, he said to me, "I'll come over tonight and talk with you." And so he came over after he had made a house call.

The manse that I lived in was an old-time house built before the Civil War and had a great, big fireplace. That evening we sat together around a brisk fire. The pastor was there with his wife, and the doctor came in and sat down with us.

He said, "You know, I went away to college to study to go as a medical missionary. And when I finished medicine, I went before the board. They examined me, and they said, 'You cannot go. Your health will not permit you to go to a foreign field.' " He said, "Why, I had prepared all my life to go as a missionary, and now I am told I can't go! Honestly, in bitterness I came way up here to this little town."

I asked him, "Is the bitterness over?"

"Oh, yes," he said. "I got over it years ago."

"Do you think God was in that experience?"

"Oh, yes, I know that now."

That doctor had taken twelve young men in that town, led them to the Lord and sent them away to college. A half dozen of them had become medical doctors, and the other six had trained and were on the field as missionaries.

And I learned that the little town of Woodbury sort of rested on that doctor's shoulders. I never walked down the street with him but what somebody didn't stop to ask him something—not just about their health, but about everything! If they were going to sell a cow or a pig, they would ask his opinion!

May I say to you, how bitter it was for that young doctor to be told that he couldn't go as a medical missionary. God brought him down by Marah, but He didn't leave him there. He led him down there so He could really use him. And He did use him.

When I heard of his death years later, I wondered how Woodbury, Tennessee, got along without him. I'm sure they survived, but they missed him. My, how important he was in that little town.

God brings His own down by Marah, if you please.

I'll tell you another experience I had in my own ministry, which has been quite limited. At the church in Nashville, when I was there, the superintendent of the junior department was a maiden lady. She had premature gray hair, and I mean it was genuine. You can't tell today. It's gotten so that if a woman has gray hair it means she's young. If she's a blonde or brunette or redhead—well, you don't know if that's her natural color or not. But in that day gray hair really meant something.

She was one of the most wonderful people I ever met. Very few of the juniors she taught went to the mission field, but they all went out into life to live for God. She followed them closely and she had an influence.

She was a beautiful woman, and I asked the superintendent of the Sunday school, "Why in the world didn't Miss Anna May get married?" He told me her story: "Before World War I, there was a young man here in this church, a fine-looking young man. They started going together and they got engaged. Then the war started and he was put in uniform. We all went down to the train station to see him off. I never shall forget how tenderly he told her good-bye. But he didn't come back. He was killed in the battle of the Marne and he's buried over there. She took his picture down, put away every remembrance of him and said, 'I will never marry.' And she didn't."

There aren't many girls like that today, fellows, I'll tell you. Oh, she was the real article. Later when the superintendent and the pastor went over to see her and asked her to take charge of the children in the junior department, she said, "I've been praying that God would give me something to do. I'll take it. It will be my life's work."

God always brings His own down to the bitter waters of Marah so that He can use them later on. And, oh, how useful she was! Hundreds of boys and girls were influenced by her.

When I first came to Los Angeles, I met a lawyer who told me, "Preacher, when I was first converted, I got my eye on a preacher and he disappointed me. I became bitter and cynical. I almost turned my back on God. How bitter I got!" Then he said, "I found out that you can't put your confidence in mere humans, Christian or not." This lawyer learned a very important lesson: You don't look to man, you look to God. Keep your eyes on Christ.

Oh, the frustration! Oh, the keen disappointment and the bitter experiences that come to God's children! And there are times when the world tumbles in on us and we wonder what to do next.

Maybe you have a little grave out on the hillside that is your Marah. Or maybe back yonder in your life you had some other experience that embittered you. God have mercy on you if you are still hanging around Marah. God never intends His children to stay there.

The question is: What do you do with your Marahs? How do you meet them? Notice what the children of Israel did first. "And the people murmured against Moses, saying, What shall we drink?"

Oh, how many times when an experience becomes bitter have you and I said, "Lord, why? Why do You let this happen to me? Why do these bitter waters have to be in my life?"

Notice what Moses did:

And he cried unto the LORD; and the LORD showed him a tree, which when he had cast into the waters, the waters were made sweet: there he made for them a statute and an ordinance, and there he tested them. (Exodus 15:25)

Is there a natural explanation for this? Well, I've heard the formula for such a chemical reaction. I sat in the class of a wonderful scholar who said that actually there is a tree that grows out there in that Sinai Peninsula which when put in bitter water will make it sweet. You can have that for what it's worth. I can give you the formula, but it's not worth that to me, because I believe this was a miracle. That tree turned the bitter waters into sweet, if you please. What is that tree for us today? That tree is the cross of Christ.

Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us; for it is written, Cursed is everyone that hangeth on a tree. (Galatians 3:13)

And He went to the tree. Oh, my friend, He was falsely accused, He was lied about, He was blasphemed, He was shamefully treated. He bore every bit of it, and He bore the curse of sin—yours and mine, if you please. It wasn't His at all. On that tree He tasted death for every person of the human family.

Do you remember the record in John 18 that tells us about the armed mob that came to Gethsemane to arrest the Lord? Simon Peter was so zealous for his Lord that he wanted to protect Him the best he could. He drew his sword and he tried to use it.

Then said Jesus unto Peter, Put up thy sword into the sheath; the cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it? (John 18:11)

Bitter! Oh, it was bitter. And every time I drink from the cup at communion I try to concentrate on the sweetness. As I taste that sweetness I think of the cup He drank. His was a bitter cup—that cup belonged to me. He took *my* cup, the bitter cup, that I might have the *sweet* cup. He did that for me.

Paul can write to you and me today, "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" (1 Corinthians 15:55). Our Lord went to the cross, and He removed the bitterness, if you please. He bore the curse. Will you listen to Simon Peter again, because you and I are going to have difficulties unless we put the cross of Christ into the bitter experiences of life.

Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to test you [or which is testing or trying you], as though some strange thing happened unto you, but rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings, that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy. (1 Peter 4:12, 13)

You and I, when the bitter experience comes, will be made bitter unless we bring the cross of Christ to bear in that experience.

Must Jesus bear the cross alone and all the world go free?

No, there's a cross for everyone, and there's a cross for me.

How we need to accept that and translate it into life when the bitter experiences come to us!

Elim

We come now to the third wilderness experience, and we'll make it the last for this message. There were seven of them; these are only the first three.

And they came to Elim, where were twelve wells of water, and threescore and ten palm trees; and they encamped there by the waters. (Exodus 15:27)

Elim means “palm trees,” and at Elim they had seventy of them! And beside that, they had twelve wells of water! That was some oasis, wasn't it?

Elim suggests abundant blessing and fruitfulness. After Marah, God always brings His children to Elim—“... Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning” (Psalm 30:5). You may lock Peter in the inner prison, but an angel is going to spring him before morning (see Acts 12). Paul and Silas may be beaten within an inch of their lives and put in a dungeon, but at midnight they're going to sing praises to God, and the doors of the prison will be flung open (see Acts 16).

God will take you down by Marah. But He won't leave you at Marah. There is an Elim ahead for the pilgrim today. And God's plan of usefulness goes by Marah to Elim. It always has; there's no exception.

Joseph—oh, the difficulties and the problems this poor boy had! But after his father died, his brothers came to him with fear. They were afraid he was going to take revenge on them. He said, “Wait, you meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.” His Marah was when he was sold into slavery by these jealous brothers, but there was Elim down the way. God brought Joseph to the oasis where there were, in effect, palm trees and an abundance of water (see Genesis 37–50).

David—oh, how wonderful it was to be a care-free shepherd boy. Then one day Samuel appeared and poured the anointing oil on him. After that, David is brought into the palace of Saul. My, it looks like everything is going to be easy. Some say it ought to be easy for God's man, but should it? One day David is before the king playing his harp to soothe him. By the way, I have often wondered how it sounded—a harp with only three strings! Maybe David wasn't a good musician because Saul threw his spear at him! Have you ever felt that way about these modern musicians?

But seriously, the reason Saul tried to kill David was because of his hatred towards him, and from that day on David took to the wilderness and the caves. Finally he even cried out to God, “I'm hunted like a partridge.” There's always a closed season on birds, but there was no closed season on David! He was being hunted constantly by Saul, and he lived like a partridge in the mountains!

But there came a day when God placed David on the throne. This rough and rugged man became the king of all Israel. He's God's man, and he went down by Marah, but God brought him to Elim.

Since America passed the log-cabin days and the rugged frontier was pushed into the Pacific Ocean, we have not produced a great man. We now have millionaires for presidents—I'm not talking politics—but no millionaire could be a president of the caliber of Abraham Lincoln. We will never again have another president out of a log cabin.

Life today lacks that touch which produces character and greatness, that which takes a man through a period where he eats the bread of adversity and drinks the water of affliction so that he

can say as the apostle Paul said, “I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound ...” (Philippians 4:12).

In this affluent and comfortable society in which you and I live, we may know how to *abound*, but how many today know how to be *abased*? My beloved, how we need to be abased, yet be able to trace the rainbow through the rain, as George Matheson wrote in the beloved hymn, “O Love That Will Not Let Me Go.”

*O joy that seeketh me through pain,
I cannot close my heart to Thee;
I trace the rainbow through the rain,
And feel the promise is not vain,
That morn shall tearless be.*

You can't have that rainbow without the rain.

Has God brought you down by Marah? You thought He made a mistake, didn't you? And you thought you were out of the will of God. But He did it for a purpose, because He takes all of His children down by Marah. But, my friend, don't stay there. Don't live there in bitterness. Take the cross of Christ and put it into those bitter waters.

Have you been mistreated? Jesus was mistreated. Have you been lied about? He was lied about. Have you been unable to defend yourself? He chose not to. When He was falsely accused, He didn't open His mouth. Do you feel like there's been injustice in your life? Well, have you read the account of His trial? They nailed Him to a cross—it was the greatest crime of history! May I say, your little Marah and my little Marah are nothing compared to His. But put that cross into your experience and it will turn your bitter waters to sweet.

Then go on to Elim. There are seventy palm trees there. And twelve springs of water!