

# Message 10: When Bitter Waters Become Sweet

3.14.2021

Exodus 15:22–27 (CSB)

## **WATER PROVIDED**

<sup>22</sup>Then Moses led Israel on from the Red Sea, and they went out to the Wilderness of Shur. They journeyed for three days in the wilderness without finding water. <sup>23</sup>They came to Marah, but they could not drink the water at Marah because it was bitter—that is why it was named Marah. <sup>24</sup>The people grumbled to Moses, “What are we going to drink?” <sup>25</sup>So he cried out to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a tree. When he threw it into the water, the water became drinkable.

The LORD made a statute and ordinance for them at Marah, and he tested them there. <sup>26</sup>He said, “If you will carefully obey the LORD your God, do what is right in his sight, pay attention to his commands, and keep all his statutes, I will not inflict any illnesses on you that I inflicted on the Egyptians. For I am the LORD who heals you.”

<sup>27</sup>Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs and seventy date palms, and they camped there by the water.

Introduction: [Egypt is in the rear-view mirror.](#)

A. Have you ever run from a problem.

1. And just when you think you have some distance from that problem, another problem shows up?

2. We often believe that once we put our “Egypt” behind us, our problems are over.

3. Our lives are full of miracle moments.

4. Miracle moments are those times when we need God to provide, intervene, or disrupt the normal.

B. Israel has left Egypt behind her.

1. Left behind are the remains of some of Egypt's finest officers and soldiers.
2. God has repaid Pharaoh's evil with appropriate justice.

C. Now, God leads Moses, and Moses leads the people.

1. The ultimate destination is known by all (the land of Canaan).
2. However, the details of the journey are unclear.
3. Will you trust God when the journey is murky?
4. Will you trust God when He takes you from miracle moment to miracle moment?
5. Will you trust God when He leads you to bitter waters?

1. Three days in the Wilderness will get to everyone.

A. Israel is now free from Egypt.

1. The journey God leads Israel on has a purpose.
2. The aim is to replace Pharaoh's image with God's image in Israel.
3. For 430 years, as slaves, Israel depended upon Pharaoh, the Nile, and others to provide for them.
4. The purpose of the journey was to teach Israel how to find their identity and provision in Yahweh.

B. 3-Days is significant in this context.

1. We could, perhaps, be super-spiritual here and recognize that in Scripture, 3-days is depicted as a dramatic intervention of God's power.
  - a. It was on the third day that Abraham and Isaac come to the mountain and find the substitute sacrifice (Gen 22).

b. It was on the third day that Esther fasts and confronts the king to save her people.

c. It was on the third day that Jonah was delivered from the belly of the whale.

d. It was on the third day that Jesus was raised from the dead by God's power.

2. But primarily, three days are the extent of time that humans can go without water.

a. The human body begins to shut down around day 3 without water.

b. The need for water in the wilderness would have been enormous.

c. One pastor proposes this:

WATER: A person's water requirements would have been 19 liters [20 quarts approximately] per day in 43 degrees Centigrade or 108 degrees Fahrenheit. Therefore, it is thought that the Israelites would have needed up to 11,000,000 gallons of water each day just to drink, wash themselves and clean dishes etc. This would be equivalent of a freight train of tank cars, 1,800 miles long just to bring water.

3. What if the guy's numbers are off by 50%?

a. So 5 million gallons of water a day?

b. Only 900-mile-long freight train a day?

4. Talk about a God-sized problem.

a. The most extraordinary people who have ever lived, all combined, would not have been able to solve this problem.

b. *This was an unsolvable problem, and unsolvable problems require an infinite and omnipotent God.*

## 2. The Wilderness places are where we meet our limits.

A. The wilderness is more than a physical location; it is a place of testing.<sup>1</sup>

1. It is in the wilderness that the questions of sonship are answered.
2. Will Israel be God's people and walk in that understanding or not?
  - a. When your life goes crazy, and you reach a wilderness season, those are the moments you discover if you will act like a child of God OR like a slave to your circumstances.
  - b. You don't often discover the real you in places of ease.
3. This theme of the Wilderness is a place of sonship happened even with Jesus.
  1. Jesus, after His baptism and the testimony of the voice that declared "This is my son with whom I am well pleased," is immediately led by the Spirit into the Wilderness for 40 days.
  2. There, Jesus was tested and tempted.
  3. Jesus' perfection was proved in the Wilderness.
  4. Jesus always was God's Son, but the Wilderness helped demonstrate that to those around about Him.
4. Israel was already God's firstborn, but it was in the wilderness that the Nations saw this and realized it.
  1. We know that by the time Israel made it to the Promised Land, all people had heard about what God had done in the Wilderness.
  2. Your days in the Wilderness is not only about you, but for those who are watching.

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<sup>1</sup> Carpenter, Eugene. *Exodus*. Edited by H. Wayne House and William D. Barrick. Evangelical Exegetical Commentary. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012. Pg 555

- a. When you struggle with an illness, people are watching.
- b. When you choose to pray for your family during desperate seasons, people are watching.
- c. They are watching for your reaction and God's action.

**B. The Wilderness will always display what is happening internally.**

1. Remember the story of Elijah in 1 Kings 18-19.
  - a. In chapter 18, Elijah is victorious over the prophets of Baal and even causes it to rain for the first time in years.
  - b. But then Jezebel threatens to kill Elijah.
  - c. In 1 Kings 19:4, Elijah flees a day's journey into the wilderness.
  - d. It was in the wilderness Elijah's heart is revealed along with God's glory.
2. It is in the Wilderness places that God tests who we are and what is in us.

**3. At Marah, the desperation gets worse.**

- A. 3 days into the wilderness, the people are complaining.
  1. Then, it looks like a miracle.
  2. Before them is a large pool of water, with enough to water everyone and the flocks.
  3. As the people rush to the water, they discover that the water is "bitter."
    - a. Wherever water comes oozes through the sand, it becomes brackish and bitter.
    - b. "The sand has tainted it, the flavour of earth has got into the blessing." Charles Spurgeon<sup>i</sup>

B. The word used here Marah (that's why they named it).

1. Throughout the Bible, this word is Myrrh.
2. This water isn't necessarily poisonous.
3. But it was polluted to the point it could not be drunk.
4. What is important is the realization that Israel now has NO hope.

C. So the people grumbled and complained to Moses.

1. I can only imagine what this felt like to Moses.
2. I hate disappointing people, but to disappoint a few million would be unfathomable.
  - a. The only way I could disappoint that many people at once would be to get in politics.
  - b. The difference here is that Moses cared for the people, and he could not bear to watch them die an agonizing death by thirst.
3. So Moses did the only thing that a Godly leader can do:
  - a. He cried out to the Lord.
  - b. When we are desperate, we find that strategies, plans, and tactics go out the window.
    1. If a new strategy will fix your problem, you aren't in the wilderness.
    2. If winning the lottery can fix all of your problems, you aren't in the wilderness.
  - c. Wilderness places are places of TESTING, where life/death and eternity are at stake.

D. Marah becomes the place of bitter waters.

1. But guess what?
2. It didn't stay that way.

#### 4. God has a way of making bitter waters sweet.

##### A. Moses cries out to God, and then God brings a solution.

1. "The Lord showed him a tree..."
2. When Moses threw it in the water, the water became drinkable.
  - a. Charles Spurgeon asks "Why didn't God have Moses use His rod?"
  - b. Time and again, God has Moses use the staff of the Lord to effect a miracle.
  - c. But here, that is not the case.
  - d. Old methods would not be enough to overcome this new problem.
3. There is no way that any ordinary branch or tree could treat enough water to satisfy this many people.
4. This is not some example of herbal medicine or essential oils, this is a miracle.
5. In essence, this is the reverse of the first plague.
  - a. During the first plague, God turned the "sweet" water of the Nile into blood.<sup>2</sup>
  - b. Here, God turns the bitter water of Marah into lifegiving water.

##### B. I can't help but see God foretelling of another day.

1. A day when God used another ordinary tree to do a miraculous work.
2. You see, it was through Jesus' death upon a tree, a cross, that made the bitter waters of sin become the sweet waters of forgiveness.

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<sup>2</sup> Enns, Peter. *Exodus*. The NIV Application Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000. 322.

3. In wilderness places, God takes ordinary things and uses them as objects to bring incredible glory.

4. If your life is more bitter than you can stand, have you considered Jesus who makes bitter waters sweet?

C. Then God takes it a step further:<sup>ii</sup>

1. Then God speaks.

2. Then God gives a command and statute for future obedience.

3. Then God promises that he will not inflict the same diseases as He did in Egypt.

4. Then God reveals Himself as the God that heals you (YHWH Rapha)

D. When you are in a wilderness place, and cannot save yourself, God demonstrates His power over every enemy, obstacle, and adversary.

1. The Israelites had seen that Yahweh could defeat adversaries. Now they must realize that he also makes whole and alive (cf. Isa 6:10; 19:22; Jer 3:22; 36:3; Hos 6:1; 14:5).<sup>3</sup>

2. The same God that defeats the enemy of his children will also make us whole and alive.

## 5. The Greatest revelations of God happen at Marah.

A. After the miracle, God leads Israel to Elim.

1. Elim is a great place.

2. Twelve Springs and 70 date palms.

a. There was enough provision in this Oasis to assist Israel on her journey.

b. God, in His goodness and providence, had long before made sure that this blessing would be planted and

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<sup>3</sup> Eugene Carpenter, *Exodus*, ed. H. Wayne House and William D. Barrick, vol. 1, Evangelical Exegetical Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012), 562.



prepared ahead of time for God's people to be sustained and revived.

c. **Elim speaks of God's providential care.**

d. The God who goes before us.

B. But Marah was the more important place.

1. One year ago, I was made aware of this sermon in a preaching conference in Granite City, IL.

2. A year ago, a faithful pastor shared this quote from Charles Spurgeon, an English preacher from the late 1800s.

3. He preached:

"Certainly one thing is clear, Israel had no miracle at Elim. Wells and palm trees they had; but they had no miracle there, no miraculous change of the bitter into the sweet; and they had no statute, and no ordinance, and no promise, and no new revelation of God, and no new name for Jehovah there. All that belonged to Marah, "for there he made them a statute and an ordinance," and there he promised, if they were faithful and obedient, that he would put none of the diseases of Egypt upon them, and there he revealed himself as Jehovah Rophi, "the Lord that healeth thee." Oh, yes, there are many virtues and many blessings in the bitter waters of Marah"! <sup>iii</sup>

C. For many of us, God has led us first not to the waters of Elim but to the bitter waters of Marah.

1. We have been brought to this forsaken place, wondering why God would lead us here for us to die.

2. **What we don't realize is that it is not at the Oasis of Elam but at the bitterness of Marah that we encounter God.**

a. It is in the days we need healing that we meet the healer.

b. It is in the days of loneliness that we encounter the presence of God in a new way.

c. It is in the wilderness that we are commanded to trust and obey.

3. When we desire a fresh revelation of God, He often takes us to the Wilderness instead of the Oasis.

- a. Some of you are praying to go deeper with God.
- b. But you wonder why things are bitter at the moment.
- c. Yet, God has a miracle for you in this place that you can't receive anywhere else.
- d. He has an experience for you that you won't have anyplace else.
- e. There is a revelation of God that can only happen at the edge of bitter waters made sweet.

Close: If the waters of life seem to bitter to drink, will you come to Jesus?

A. Do we not see Christ there at the edge of bitter waters?

- 1. Has not God already taken a common piece of creation, an old-rugged tree, and bless its commonness, and then offer it to bring salvation to the nations?
- 2. Has Jesus already not tasted the bitter waters of death so that we need not fear death any longer?
- 3. Has Jesus not already paid the price of our sin so that we could taste and drink of the River of Life.

B. Is this not the same offer that Jesus made the Woman at the well in John 4?

- 1. He did not offer to exchange the bitter waters she had always thirsted for with living water?
- 2. Why do you continue to choose the bitter waters when Jesus makes the sweet available?

3. Is this not the same Jesus who said in John 7: <sup>37</sup> On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. <sup>38</sup> Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’ ”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/marah-or-the-bitter-waters-sweetened/#flipbook/>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/marah-better-than-elim/#flipbook/>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/marah-better-than-elim/#flipbook/>

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<sup>4</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Jn 7:37–38.