

The Bitter Made Sweet

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[0 : 01] Let us now turn to the book of Exodus and chapter 15, and we may read again at verse 22.

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 Mara, they could not drink of the waters of Mara, for they were bitter, and therefore the name of it was called Mara.

The book of Exodus is not a book of history as such, although it contains the true history of Israel's salvation.

It is a book that shows the pattern of salvation in Jesus Christ, which is why the New Testament describes the work of Christ in terms of the Exodus.

[1 : 22] You remember on the Mount of Transfiguration, where he met with Moses and Elijah. That was the topic of conversation, the Exodus that was to be in his experience.

Once, New Testament believers too were enslaved in the Egypt of their sin.

But then Jesus came to set them free. He is your Passover Lamb. And the New Testament explains the connection between the first Exodus and the greater Exodus in the following terms.

In the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians, chapter 10. Now these things were our examples to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted.

And again, in verse 11 of that chapter, all these things happened unto them for examples, and they are written for our admonition.

[2 : 34] In other words, Israel's experience was also for the benefit of the New Testament believer. What happened to them teaches us also how to live for Christ.

The Christian life is a wilderness journey towards the promised land. You might say that throughout the whole period of travel, that God is at work to reduce your trust in yourself, so that you learn to trust solely in God.

Remember at this point that we read, the people of Israel have just newly crossed the Red Sea, marvelously delivered from the military power and might of the Egyptian forces.

Their deliverance resulted in their trust in God, and their voices in the earlier part of chapter 15, were raised in choral harmony, as one united in praise of the name of God.

In the order of salvation, once a soul is justified and adopted, the work of progressive sanctification begins.

[4 : 01] Progressive sanctification. Remember? The shorter catechism. Shorter catechism always helps you to get a grasp and a grip of the doctrines of the Bible.

What is sanctification? The work of God's grace, not the act of God's grace. Justification is an act. Adoption is an act. Sanctification is the work of God's grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die and to sin and live unto righteousness.

So, as you go through the wilderness, God is at work. What is he doing? He is renewing your whole man in the image of God.

The Israelites had made a decisive break with Egypt. Yet, although they had come out of Egypt, there was much of Egypt that required to be removed from them.

The process of sanctification had begun. Almost as soon as the last notes of praise faded away, we read in the passage, So Moses produced you from the Red Sea, and they went out into the wilderness of Shad.

[5 : 25] They may have expected to head directly to Canaan, the promised land. In reality, it wasn't that far away, if they could have taken the shortest and the most direct route.

And in many ways, that is just like the newly converted believer, in the throes of newfound liberty, they might think that they were immediately going from grace to glory.

But that doesn't happen often. Doesn't happen often. But sometimes, it does. It reminds me of a time in my old life, when I was a very young Christian, and I was at Communion and Barbers, and I was with an old worthy, who has long since departed this life.

And on the Sabbath evening, we went to the village of Arnolf. There were services in various districts. And the service was being conducted by one who is now a very elderly minister, but still living.

The Reverend Kenneth MacLeod, who was minister, or who became minister at Barbers at one stage, stays in Australia. He was then a divinity student.

[6 : 57] And he was allocated to preach, because there wasn't enough ministers. There would have been three ministers. But if there was somebody, like a divinity student available, they would put them to one of the villages, save the minister of the congregation going out.

And during that service, in my ignorance, I thought I was ready to go to glory. I was very far from it. But in my ignorance, I thought I was.

So much enjoyment did I have in the fellowship of the Lord's people and under the preaching of the gospel. Well, we know of one person in the Bible, at least, of whom it was true.

The thief who was brought to faith in Christ during his last moments in this world. And you know, as you think about it, what an unlikely candidate for glory.

Many might have thought, whoever gets to glory, this man is not fit to enter into glory. But you see, the Bible teaches us that the good seed is sown in the most unlikely of places.

[8 : 25] It's sown on top of mountains. Remember, Psalm 72 speaks of the seed being sown on them.

And can you think of a more unlikely place to produce a harvest on the top of a mountain, barren, rocky, without hardly any soil.

And that is the kind of imagery the Bible uses to illustrate the kind of unlikely places the seed of the word of God falls.

And so you remember the prayer of that man in the very midst of darkness, when the powers of darkness were at their height and when they thought they had triumphed.

And this man is crying out, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. How magnificently Christ analyzed his plea.

[9 : 29] Where do we see the analysis of this man's plea, remember me? Is it not in the response that Christ gives? Ah, verily I say unto thee, today, thou shalt be with me.

You don't find the man asking. Let me be with you. But Christ interprets his plea. So in the plea that he makes remember me is implicit.

Let me not be separated from you. It's more than a plea just for mere remembrance. Let me not be separated from you.

I'm Christ who understands our thoughts, who reads our thoughts and who knows our words before we speak them, says, You shall be with me.

What a gracious and a loving response. How marvelous is the exercise of divine grace and the lives of those who are touched by it.

[10 : 37] Believers still pray, Lord, remember me, not because they're hanging helplessly on a cross, but because of their daily circumstances in life where they dread being separated from their Lord.

So, some do receive a quick transition from grace to glory. but the majority have to travel the wilderness.

Testing and trial invariably follows their being set free. I used to hear old Christians say to the young converts, you are currently in the green fields as a new convert, but wait until you have to go out onto the moor and you have to graze on the heather and then perhaps your joy will not be quite so full.

In other words, there are no shortcuts to glory. The Israelites couldn't enter the promised land without journeying through the wilderness and the wilderness is a hard place.

Yes, it's a place where you meet with God, but it's a difficult place. It's barren and desolate. So, here we find these people setting out on a long and an arduous journey.

[12 : 02] Going through the wilderness wasn't necessary for their salvation, but it was necessary for their sanctification.

They had already been delivered, but they had to be sanctified. They had much to learn about God and his dealings. They also had much to learn about themselves.

Their faith was still weak. They were led into times of difficulty and testing so that their spiritual faculties might be developed through use. One thing to sing the praises of their deliverer, but it's quite another to live out their faith when they are confronted by the problems of ordinary living.

people. So the church now is living between the first and the second coming of Christ. He came once to save the church. He will come again to lead his people home.

But in the meantime, believers are on a long and difficult pilgrimage which God is using to sanctify their lives.

[13 : 10] the Bible teaches we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God. It doesn't mean that your salvation isn't secure, but the way is still hard.

You will face disappointment, difficulty, discouragement and doubt. All of the problems are meant to teach us to depend on God alone and to have absolute confidence in his faithfulness.

Well, two thoughts from our text. First of all, a reminder and secondly, requisite obedience. Why do they need a reminder?

Is it not because that life in the wilderness, if we're not careful, can sometimes make us forgetful? The very first psalm we sang here this evening, Psalm 103, you remember how that psalm develops?

in the second verse, bless all my soul, the Lord thy God, not forget for be of all his gracious benefits he hath bestowed on thee.

[14 : 21] Why does the psalmist say that? for the very simple reason, for the very simple reason, that we are prone to forget, what he has done for us.

And so, here they needed a reminder, after verses 22 to 25, they were just after the Red Sea deliverance, they went out into the wilderness of Shur, and there they went three days in the wilderness and found no water.

No, you don't need a great, a great vivid imagination to understand that three days in the desert was a time of real testing.

think of mothers with infants, without water to drink. Think of elderly people who needed help and assistance, no water.

Think of all the animals that they took with them from Egypt, requiring to be watered. And the psalmist draws a picture for us from his own life of a period in the desert, and he says, my soul thirsteth, my flesh longeth, for thee in a dry and thirsty land where no water is.

[15 : 39] And at the end of these three days they find water. What a relief it must have been to find water. What a source of joy when they saw the water until they tasted it.

When they came to Mara, they could not drink of the waters of Mara, for they were bitter. If their anticipatory joy was great, how much greater their sense of disappointment.

they could not drink of the waters of Mara, for they were bitter. You remember a character in the Old Testament by the name of Naomi, and after the grievous and sore loss, she sustained the Lord, removing not only her husband, but her two sons.

and you remember her testimony, I went out full, and the Lord brought me home again empty. It was by being emptied that she was able to be filled with the fullness of blessing anew.

And often that's how the Lord works. He empties you in order to fill you. and you know the emptying can be painful at times, when you've been emptied of self, and self-reliance, and all of that involves.

[17 : 17] And you remember she was saying, why call me Naomi, seeing the Lord, the Almighty has afflicted me. She could testify first hand to the grievous pain of chastisement. And I'm sure I've already told you, I often used to hear from our own minister, God's rod of chastisement hangs in the chamber of his fervent love.

And that is so true. That's where he keeps his rod of chastisement, in the room of his fervent love. It flows from love.

That's not how often we think of chastisement. It's not often how we see it. That's why it is written in the Bible that no chastening for the present seems to be joyous but grievous.

Nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them that are exercised thereby. Naomi says, I went out full in my own strength guided by my own wisdom.

Without being led or directed by the Lord, I went out. But the Lord brought me back. He brought me home empty.

[18 : 31] She wasn't forsaken. She was brought back. Better to be empty and under the leadership and guidance of the Lord than to be full as we see it and going away from God.

to be saved. Remember how the neighbours were asking is this Naomi? And she responds, Call me not Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.

And so, here were these people and they were feeling let down. The waters were there but they were undrinkable.

And maybe you're here this evening and you too can say that Mara has been in your experience. You can go back perhaps this evening to a certain experience in your life and you called it Mara.

Perhaps Mara has been more than once in your life because it's not necessarily a one-off testing. Perhaps even this evening you feel that you are at Mara, a place of bitterness, a place of disappointment, a place of heartbreak.

[19 : 56] What caused Mara to be in your own life while illness can bring Mara into your life.

Separation from loved ones can bring Mara into your life. Family cares and burdens can cause Mara to be in your experience.

marriage. The breaking of a friendship can bring about Mara in your experience. Turmoil in a community or in a congregation or in a church can bring about Mara in the experience of the children of grace.

It can be the result of spiritual trial where you doubt your salvation or even the word of God. You see, it's not a matter of whether you will come to Mara.

It is rather that we will come to it. But how will we cope with Mara? We cannot always control our circumstances but we can and must control ourselves in the midst of our circumstances.

[21 : 12] And that's not easy. We possibly all know how easy it is to become bitter over our circumstances and to take that bitterness out on those around us. There is the danger that Mara gets into us and that we are unable to get Mara out of our lives.

And the result here was that they began to complain. The people murmured against Moses saying, what shall we drink? There is their amnesia coming to the fore, their forgetfulness, their suffering from loss of memory.

And you remember what we sang in the psalm, our fathers understood not thy wonders in Egypt, they remembered not the multitude of thy mercies, but provoked him at the sea, even at the Red Sea.

It's only a matter of three days since the Red Sea was divided by God and a nation brought a cross in safety. Three days since they had sinned, God destroyed their enemy.

And over and above they have lived in the shadow of the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire, the presence of God visible among them. Yet they complain.

[22 : 26] Some ways they're like Pharaoh. You remember before Israel got out of Egypt, God revealed his power in several great acts, but what happened?

Pharaoh continued to harden his heart, refused to let the people go. Well, a similar kind of amnesia seems to have affected the covenant children of God.

As I mentioned in the introduction, all these things happened unto them for examples and they are written for our admonition.

In other words, when we read these things, we are as it were looking into a mirror at ourselves. When we are confronted by trial and tribulation, it is so easy to forget.

Forgetfulness with regard to the great things the Lord has done for you. Well, how can you go forward? may sound paradoxical, but in many ways it is by looking back.

[23 : 43] You see, in the first part of this chapter, they look back to what God had done, the marvelous deliverance executed by the Lord at the Red Sea, but also looking forward to what had not yet taken place in the Christian life, looking back to the teaching that says that God has begun, what he will complete.

The one who has delivered will yet deliver. The one who has placed your foot on the path will bring you through the wilderness into the place of promise. That's the lesson.

You have to look back to what God has done in Christ in order to go forward in his strength and in his grace. I think it was Murray McChain who used to speak about his own regular disciplined times of personal devotion, and he explained that he had, and we would call it a daily quiet time.

in fact, I was told, or I heard actually related, since our queen died, that there was a half hour in her day, in the morning, where she would have no interruptions of any kind, didn't matter who was trying to contact her, there must be no interruptions, because she spent that half hour reflecting on the word of God.

I thought that was most commendable, and a huge example, and to hear that related, and it was someone who had been speaking to one of the ladies-in-waiting who had heard that first hand, and I thought it was most commendable.

[25 : 48] Well, McChain had this practice, and not because he would say he was attempting to pile up grace for the day, if you remember the manner, you'll know why he would say that, but he had this practice that helped him to keep focused on the teachings of God throughout the day, and I think that is part of the lesson of Exodus 15, to train our eyes never to wander from the cross, to give our eye the habit of constantly looking back to God's mighty deliverance, lest we are overwhelmed by the troubles of today.

If you keep your eyes on Jesus, on Calvary, on God's great work of redemption, you will never begin to grumble or give plausibility to your complaint that God is insufficient for today's trials.

You see, that was implied in their cry. What shall we drink? It's as if they were saying, God has brought us out into this place and he hasn't provided for us. He's insufficient for our trials.

How can the God who did not spare his own son but give him up for us all? How can he be insufficient for the trials of today or the trials of tomorrow?

If he has given his son at Calvary, will he keep back his acts of mercy in the trials of today?

[27 : 32] Will he not give you the grace to bear you up in the tribulation of today? Keep your eyes on the cross. And instead of what Israel did at Marah, look at what Moses did.

Look at the difference between Moses and the people of Israel. There's a huge gulf. Verse 25, Moses cried unto the Lord.

God. The people were grumbling, but Moses cried unto the Lord. That's what faith does in trial.

No panic, no despair, but he cries out to God. And that indicates that he is resting the whole of his confidence in God.

and God answered and intervened and provided. And you see the very fact that God answered indicates that his prayer was a prayer of faith.

[28 : 43] Remember what the New Testament teaches. Paul writing to the Philippians, be careful for nothing, but in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God and the peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Forgetfulness of God's past salvation leads to grumbling in the crisis of today. But faith in the cross, faith in the God of the cross produces prayer in daily trouble.

And so the Lord showed them what to do. So that's the first lesson from this, a reminder, a warning if you like, if we're not careful.

Life in the wilderness can sometimes make us forget, and so we need to train our eyes and fix them on God's mighty redeeming work in Jesus Christ.

But then the requisite obedience. Life in the wilderness is intended to help us to obey. Notice in verse 25, Moses prays, And the Lord showed him a tree, which when he had cast into the waters, the waters were made sweet.

[30 : 12] Now, the tree just didn't magically appear. The tree was always there. But God had to show it to Moses.

And there are some temptations that face commentators here. One is to spiritualize the log or the tree. The tree is thrown into the bitter waters.

That's the cross. The cross makes the bitter water sweet. It's tempting, but I don't believe it's right. The other is to look for a natural explanation.

What kind of wood was it that could change the taste of the water from being bitter to sweet? Well, I don't believe that either. This is clearly a supernatural event.

And however you look at it, the focus of attention is this. It has to do with the word translated in our version.

[31 : 19] The Lord showed him a tree. It's a word in the Hebrew that comes from the same root as the word Torah, the word for God's law, his teaching, his instruction, his statutes, and so on.

God instructs Moses on where to find this particular tree, what to do with it. And as Moses carefully obeys the instruction of God, the water is made drinkable and sweet.

So, in effect, God is directing the attention of the people of Israel and we, the readership, to his law, to his teaching.

He uses a string of synonyms for the Torah. You know, you can see it there in verse 26. The voice of the Lord, the commands of God, the statutes of God.

If thou wilt diligently hearken to the voice of the Lord thy God, and wilt do that which is right in his sight, will give ear to his commands, keep all his statutes, I will put none of these diseases upon thee, which I have brought upon the Egyptians.

[32 : 34] In other words, their trouble fee, life from disease, was conditional on obedience to the word of God. And the reason that he gives, I am the Lord that healeth thee.

When the people of God obey in faith, the bitter waters of our wilderness journey are made sweet by the grace of the Lord our healer.

And just to drive that point home, notice that immediately after the incident at Marah, God brings the people on to Elam, a place of great abundance.

Now, you might say that this life has many Marahs in it. But you know one day you will come to Elam.

And when you come to Elam, there'll never be a Marah in your life again. You'll have passed out of this world into the place of super abundance, of total refreshing, the place where you need never again experience the bitter waters or the bitterness of Marah in your life.

[34 : 03] life. Well, when God's people depend on him and trust him and obey him, when life in the wilderness is marked by faithfulness to God's law, then you can be sure that the Lord will be according to his promise in your life.

life. You see, the life that God blesses is the life that displays obedience. Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he who does who loves me and he who loves me will be loved by my father and I will love him, manifest myself to him.

As the father has loved me, so have I loved him, abide in my love and so on. In other words, Jesus' teaching obedience leads to an experience of the love of the father and the son who come to us with a new depth and intimacy and manifest themselves to us.

It leads to abiding in Christ and the fullness of joy. Obedience makes the bitter water sweet. It's often our disobedience that leaves us tasting the bitterness of Mara.

Or as Psalm 1 puts it, and I think it echoes the language or the lessons of Mara, blessed is the man. What is true of the man who is blessed?

[35 : 35] He walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers, but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night.

He is like a tree planted by streams of water. In other words, the evergreen life, the blessed life, the life that finds living water in a dry land, the life of faith that obeys and delights in the law of the Lord.

And I think these two things go together. The life that forgets the salvation of God and Christ and grumbles is not likely to be a life that joyfully obeys the Lord.

A life that clings to the cross, to Jesus who has rescued us, is a life that knows that God's ways are best, even when they are the most difficult ways.

It's a life that listens diligently to the voice of the Lord, a life that finds satisfaction in the hands of the God who is known as Jehovah Rophe, the Lord that healeth thee.

[37 : 07] A wilderness life can make us forget, so we are asked to focus on the cross that we might not be a people of grumbling nature, but a people who praise the Most High.

I dare say, if I were to put the question I'd ask you here, just one simple question, did you grumble all summer, that the weather wasn't to your liking, were there days when you weren't happy, that's just a very small illustration, and yet you have to remember, he is the God of providence, as well as the God of grace, he gave your life every day, did you live it for him, were you delighting in him, and was your delight outweighing the grumbling that threatened to overthrow your heart and your mind, well, he gave them elam, he'll give every Christian elam, there'll be an elam in your life, and you'll never leave that oasis again, you'll be there eternally, satiated forever, let us pray,

O eternal God, we thank thee, that thou art the God of great grace, the God of glorious mercy, the God of rich provision, who provides for your people, even although they often fail to appreciate the greatness and the richness of the provision, and more importantly, the greatness of the provider, O help us to look unflinchingly to thee, and the glory shall be thine, in Jesus' name we ask it, Amen.

Let us conclude by singing to his praise from Psalm 1, Psalm 2, for Psalm 2, that man hath perfect blessedness, walketh not astray in counsel of ungodly men, nor stands in sinners' way, nor sitteth in the scornish chair, but placeth his delight upon God's law, and meditates on his law day and night.

Sing down to the end of the verse marked fold, that man hath perfect blessedness, walketh not astray in counsel of ungodly men. That man hath perfect blessedness, who walketh not astray in counsel of ungodly men, nor stands in sinners' way, nor sitteth in the scornish chair, and places his delight, upon God's love and meditates on his law day and night.

[41 : 09] He shall be like that tree that rose near black in by a river, which in his season gives his fruit and his fruit filled out never.

And our πολ■ beer cherry hear art san ad e n à fed I b e pou més di min um qu de beraupt pau 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.