

Benefits From Bitterness

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[0 : 00] Let's briefly turn this evening to Exodus chapter 15, and we're looking at verses 22 through to the end of the chapter.

Then Moses made Israel set out from the Red Sea, and they went into the wilderness of Shur. They went three days in the wilderness and found no water. When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter.

Therefore it was named Marah. And the people grumbled against Moses, saying, What shall we drink? And he cried to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a log or a tree, and he threw it into the water.

And the water became sweet. So on down to the end of the chapter. Israel had such a glorious redemption from Egypt, such a glorious exit from their slavery in Egypt.

And then you read in chapter 15 here the wonderful song of praise, the joy that is expressed through that song that they sang when they noticed themselves safe on the other side of the Red Sea and all their enemies overtaken by the Lord's judgment in bringing the waters back upon them.

[1 : 20] You almost feel as you come, if you didn't know the ways of the Lord, as you come to this part of the chapter from verse 22, that it sort of spoils the scene.

It's so full of glorious joy and triumph and victory and assurance that God is their God. All of these things as they're packed into this great song of praise.

And then the scene changes. And you almost ask, What is God doing? Why is God bringing such a thing into their experience so soon after this triumphant experience?

So soon after this glorious redemption has taken place? Why is God bringing them to such difficult circumstances? Why is God bringing them to such a thing?

Why is God bringing them to such a thing?

[3 : 09] It tells us there that he tested them or put them to the test to see not only how they would react, but also, as we'll see, to give them a rule, to give them a principle that they should have taken with them and carried out for the rest of their course, the rest of their journey, which sadly, as we sang a few minutes ago, they actually forgot.

Why did this happen?

Because the experience of these people of Israel, he has brought these things about so that we now could actually benefit from the teaching of these verses. Well, what do they teach? Well, what do they teach?

They teach two things, at least, we can look at two things tonight. First of all, Mara brings out what lies in the heart. Mara brings out what lies in the heart.

And that involves two things, testing and followed by teaching. Secondly, Mara teaches us the place of obedience.

[4 : 41] Mara teaches us the place of obedience. That also in relation to two things. In the use of means that God has given us. And secondly, in leading to our satisfaction.

It teaches us the place of obedience. As we use means, and as in the use of these means, it brings us to satisfaction.

Mara brings out what lies in the heart here. First of all, it's a testing for them. Notice what it says in verses 25 and 26. He cried to the Lord. The Lord showed him a tree.

It's translated here a log. He threw it into the water and the water became sweet. There the Lord made for them a statute and a rule. And there he tested them.

Saying, if you will diligently listen to the voice of the Lord your God and so on, then I will not put any of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians.

[5 : 41] For I am the Lord your healer. And yet, when you go into the next chapter, he filled their lives with bread from heaven. When the manna came down to feed them, the manna was going to follow them all the way through the wilderness.

And yet, in the next chapter again, in chapter 17, here they are grumbling again. So they haven't taken with them what happened at Mara followed by Elam. They haven't taken really any account significantly of the manna and the wonder of the manna and the provision of the manna.

As soon as they come to another crisis, again, they hadn't water. So the people actually came to grumble against Moses and indeed against the Lord.

What they needed to learn and what God was setting out to teach them, and it's really one of the great points for us to take with us from this passage, because it's threaded from here all the way through the rest of the scripture, is that faith thrives best in the soil of adversity.

Faith thrives best in the soil of adversity. At this time of year, we're at the stage of putting plants, if you're growing plants indoors in a greenhouse or wherever, you're growing plants ready to be planted outside.

[7 : 07] It's around about now that you're beginning to set them out. You actually put them each day out and take them back in at night. You get them used to the weather outside.

You get them accustomed to being outside of the greenhouse so that they can become established where they're going to grow. And the reason for that is that as they experience the wind and the conditions outside of the greenhouse, it helps them to actually set down firm roots.

It helps them to set down roots that they would not otherwise have if you kept them in the greenhouse. Yes, they would thrive there. They would actually grow a lot in terms of the above earth foliage and flowers and so on, but you would never have the same strength of rooting and the same attachment to the soil as you have when they're outside and when they're being allowed to experience the wind and the breeze hitting them right in the face.

That's how it is with these people. That's how it is with God's people. However, we've come to know him and we come to know him in differing circumstances.

Some people do come to know him very gently, just as if they're brought to life in a greenhouse situation. Other people come to know him already through adversity, having come through difficult, hard times, having fallen on hard times, and in that crying out to the Lord.

[8 : 41] But it doesn't matter how we've come to know him. Along the way, God is going to test our faith. God is going to give us conditions in which the roots of our spiritual life will actually go downwards and be strengthened and actually come to give us greater stability in the whole of our life.

And the reason God brings us adversity, difficulties, trials, problems, hard decisions to take is so that these roots of our lives will in fact come firmly down into the foundation that is Christ himself. It is God who brought them to this place. And we mustn't be surprised if we too find that very soon after being taken out of Egypt, being taken out of our situation in the world, we should not be surprised if very soon afterwards something comes along that really tries and tests what we're made of spiritually.

We don't know when it'll happen. God actually placed this at this time in their way precisely at this time it was his purpose it was his plan.

And it's exactly the same for the Christian for every believer at some point or other as God has planned it as God has placed it precisely knowing our needs knowing our circumstances knowing our situation knowing the kind of minds we have knowing the kind of people we are taking account of everything we are including our circumstances in life God will bring us to a Mara of some kind.

[10 : 23] If you turn to Peter 1 Peter there's some verses there we can just briefly glance at that fit in with what we're saying here they're well known verses to you I'm sure but 1 Peter chapter 1 when again he's beginning on a note of triumph there at verse 3 that section Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ according to his great mercy he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead to an inheritance that is imperishable undefiled and unfading kept in heaven for you who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time what a mouthful what a sentence what a glorious triumphant sentence that is there's if you like the exodus repeated in the personal sense in which Peter is saying this God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ he's brought us out of the Egypt of our sin he's begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead he has actually brought us in that from the dead and brought us to a living hope and

it's so that we will come to this inheritance that is kept for us it's imperishable it's undefiled there's a canine waiting for us at the other side at the end of the journey and so far you're up to the equivalent of Exodus 15 and the first half of the chapter or more the first 21 verses and then you have in this story you rejoice though now for a little while if necessary or as necessary you have been grieved by various trials so that the tested genuineness of your faith more precious than gold that perishes though it is dried by fire might be found to result in praise and honour and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ in other words

Peter is saying God has brought you out God has brought you to life God has redeemed you God has brought you by his own fatherly power and mercies to know himself and he's brought you out so that he would bring you in following the language of the Old Testament in regard to the Exodus as God said when he came down to rescue the people he had come to take them out so that he would take them into an inheritance but in between there's testing and the testing begins three days into their journey no sooner are they across the Red Sea than God is sending them circumstances for their testing for their instruction designed for them to set down their spiritual roots so that they'll be a well grounded stable people spiritually now in that many of them of course failed they didn't take note of what God was saying to them they didn't carry it with them but that was the important element that God was teaching them and in 1 Peter there you'll notice the word necessary and it's an important word in that context in this says Peter you rejoice you rejoice in the salvation you rejoice in what God has done you triumph in the triumph of God himself but now it is necessary for you to be tried by various trials manifold temptations is the AV way of putting it and it's necessary for you in other words he's saying it's not something as a kind of tacked on experience that's that's been given to you by God as an optional extra the adversities of the Christian life are not optional extras not things over which we can decide well we don't really need that we can just put that aside we'd be better without that

God is saying to us they are necessary for you they're part of my plan for you that in my program of dealing with you in a way that will finally bring you to your inheritance but you will not reach your inheritance except as you go through certain Mara experiences to learn on the way what it's like to be one of my people to be my people together indeed it is necessary for you and of course the Maras will be different for each individual your Mara will not be the same necessarily as my Mara our experiences in what gives bitterness to our experience to our life in this world the circumstances for that will be very different from between one Christian and another the principle of it is the same the reason for it is the same the purpose in it is the same it's to instruct us to teach us to test us in our relationship with God and you see the only way that they could have really come as we see to the satisfaction of Elam was not just by coming to Mara but by actually tasting the waters of Mara they could not have known what the waters of Mara were really like by simply being told don't touch these waters they're bitter they tasted the waters and by tasting them they experienced their bitterness and that's how it is in the Christian life you don't skirt by certain things that God points out to you but takes you safely on a bypass so that you don't really have to taste the bitterness we come to know the difficult things of life by tasting them by coming through our own experience of them to know yes they are bitter but then you remember that's exactly what your Savior did in order to redeem you right up to the very cross itself because when he was offered the anesthetic on the sponge near the start of his sufferings he refused it he wouldn't take it he was going to taste the bitterness of the cross thoroughly for his people as he went to die for them and you follow him in the way of testing because God brings us to admire us for a purpose but it's also not just a testing there's also a teaching in it when you read here that the Lord actually made this a rule in verse 25 there the Lord made for them a statute and a rule and he tested them saying what does this mean that the

Lord made this a statute a statute is a rule or a law or a command what does it mean that God made this what did he make a statute and a rule well in a sense it's the whole experience but it's especially this part of it where the purpose of God is that they will actually learn that the way to blessing is by obedience to him in all their circumstances in fact the rule is really expanded on and described if you like in verse 26 the Lord made for them a statute and a rule and there he tested them saying if you will diligently listen to the voice of the Lord your God and do that which is right in his eyes I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians for I am the Lord your healer in other words you will experience my healing touch God is saying you will experience me as your healing savior the one who really looks after your life in its entirety but it's through obedience

that you'll experience that if you obey me and keep my commands there's the principle there's the rule there's the statute that God is establishing right at the start of their journey and that's why it's at the start of their journey not halfway through the wilderness the Lord doesn't allow them to go halfway through the wilderness and then come in with a suffering and an adversity through which they would learn how important obedience is we have to learn that at the very start we have to learn it at the very beginning of our pilgrimage that the way through to blessing is by being obedient to [19 : 28] God by having this rule the statute carried out in our own lives as we're tested whenever the testings come in different ways to us so there's the first thing that manna brings out what lies in the heart because it's a testing and because it contains this element of teaching in it it is for us as we take the spiritual meaning from that it is that God brings us into circumstances designed for our testing and our teaching at the same time and through all of that he is holding before us this rule this statute that as you make your way onwards to blessing and to more blessing following you do it through obedience to God's will in the way that he leads in the path that he takes us onto whatever it is for you and I as individuals it's God's way it's God's path it's God's appointment it's not arbitrary it's not carelessly chosen it's not just left to ourselves the Lord takes us to each

Mara secondly Mara teaches us the place of obedience now we've said that in principle that's really in many ways what the statute the rule that he brought out was really about obedience was the way to blessing but it teaches that in different ways because you can see two things here that are important in regard to the teaching of obedience and the importance of obedience first of all in the use of means we should say first of all that isn't it very important indeed that God came to Mara with them you see we can read over these words fairly quickly when the people said what shall we drink he cried Moses cried to the Lord and the Lord showed him this tree looks like it was a small tree it's translated here log I think a tree is probably better translation but in any case the Lord showed him the Lord pointed it out to him in other words it's really saying to us that in this bitter experience in these circumstances of the waters of Mara God did not say to them you go into this Mara and I'll meet you on the other side but you're on your own until you learn how to cope and how to deal with these circumstances God comes with us to Mara God comes into our Mara with us God is there for us as he brings us to Mara he doesn't leave us to face the testings alone that's why he's saying here I am the Lord your healer I'm there at Mara with you I'm showing you how to deal with it but you see he is showing Moses this tree and it's interesting that the word show here in Hebrew is very very like the word for law in Hebrew in other words there's a connection together here quite deliberately in the passage between the word show in regard to this tree that Moses has been shown and the statute or the law that the people are being taught

God is really saying to them in these circumstances says I am going to teach you something that you will need to carry with you I'm giving you a rule and a statute I'm showing you the way I'm showing you the means I'm showing you how to go about it I'm showing you this tree but of course having said that although the way is through the bitterness to the satisfaction of Elam the important point now is that it's by the use of this means God didn't just say in response to Moses crying to him leave it to me and I'll just make these waters sweet God could have made these waters sweet by just speaking a word as he had created water in the beginning he could have said let these waters be sweetened and they would have been sweetened but God didn't do that miraculously through no means at all he did it through the means of Moses taking what

God had shown him and casting that into the waters and the waters were made sweet in other words God is not going to sweeten our Marah by just performing a miraculous act without expecting us to do our part without expecting us to use the means that he has given us without expecting us to actually take what he shows us is the means towards our satisfaction and our sweetening of the circumstances and that of course is above all Jesus himself he is the one that we have shown in order to sweeten our bitterness or to bring sweetness out of our bitterness the Lord showed him which three to use the

[25 : 05] Lord shows us that Jesus is himself the great means by which our life deals with the bitterness that comes out way in a way that is leading us on to further blessing and satisfaction and learning from but we have to use the means God doesn't just point them out and leave it at that Moses had to take the tree and having taken the tree he had to cast it into the water and you have to take Christ with you into the bitter water of Marah you have to reach out by faith you have to wrestle with him you have to pray to him you have to seek him in his word you have to actually go to where you know he's provided for you in the word especially and through prayer and you've got to

take this wonderful means that God has given us to bring him into our Marah he doesn't leave us alone but he doesn't do everything for us and you and

I have to take very carefully this Jesus whenever you find difficulty trial don't try and cope with it yourself don't say well God's going to take care of this and he doesn't really require anything of me at all I'll just sit back until it's over you go to Jesus with it you ask Jesus to come into it with you ask for his strength you pray for his guidance you pray for patience you pray for the grace that enables you to deal with this difficulty not just to deal with it and to overcome it but to learn from it you pray for Christ to be with you so that he will instruct your soul as you are going through it so that you will learn from that as the people of Israel failed to learn that you will not be like that that you will come from the matters of your experience to learn more to draw you closer to himself it's relatively easy to sing as they sang in verses 1 to 18 all of us can sing in the circumstances of triumph it's not at all easy to sing when you're facing the waters of

Mara and have tasted them and yet even there the Lord the Lord is leading us to singing and leading us to praise and leading us to further experiences of his blessing and he's teaching us that it's appropriate to sing in respect to our sufferings when we see them as God will enable us to see them by his grace as part of his own program isn't that really the way in which Psalm 103 begins and why it contains in these opening verses such wonderful emphasis as these verses have bless the Lord oh my soul bless the Lord and be not forgetful of all his benefits he is the one who redeems you who heals you who causes you that you do not go down to death that's where God leads us through the bitterness of Mara on towards yet more singing and more triumph as his grace works in our lives so it's in the use of means but Mara teaches us the place of obedience also in that it leads to our satisfaction isn't it significant that all that's in these verses up to verse 26 is then immediately replaced without a break and just straight into it in verse 27 then they came to Elam when Mara was finished when the experience of Mara was over when the Lord had done everything at Mara that he designed to do for the people when all of that was finished then they came to Elam where there were 12 springs of water and 70 palm trees and they encamped there by the water now the number of springs of water and the number of palm trees shows that there was abundant water there to actually enable all of this to grow there and all of this water to be there at that time there was plenty of water at

Elam but why the numbers 12 springs of water and 70 palm trees why bother mentioning it why not just say that there was plenty water there for them why so precise why the exact numbers in this context well it's difficult to be absolutely sure but I think it's indicative of the 12 tribes that made up the whole of the people they didn't have to squabble over who was going to get to a well first there was one for each tribe if they wanted to arrange it that way and the 70 brings your mind back to the way the people were in the beginning when Jacob went down to Egypt and we're told more than once that there were 70 souls in total in other words the

[31 : 07] Lord is really bringing them back in the history he's bringing them back to the kind of people they are to the wholeness of the people to the complete people of Israel the Israel in their ancestor Jacob who went down to Egypt with his families the whole of the people that develop from that they have now become 12 tribes and they are a massive crowd of people but God has plenty for everyone God is providing for the whole people enough to sustain them and as long as they are obedient to him that's what they're going to experience they will never run out as the people of God all that's required of them is that they listen to his voice that they do his commands that they follow his directions is that too much to ask of course not but do they do it no they don't which is why so many of the

Psalms that reflect on these times actually reflect with lament over the people's disobedience and failure to obey their God even though at the very beginning of their journey he had made this a rule and a statute for them the sequences Mara through the means that God has given leads to healing and that leads to satisfaction at Elim there's the same program for your Christian life for your Christian experience the Maras through the means that God has given us through our obedience to him and using them he turns them at his own time and his own leisure into experiences of Elim for us we come to know satisfaction as God brings us to learn from our bitter things and just one final point surely

Elim was all the sweeter for having tasted the bitterness of Mara previously when you taste something really bitter and you put it aside saying that's horrible and then you taste something that you know is really sweet and tasty it feels all the sweeter and the more tasty for the fact that you

have tasted its opposite before that and it's the same in our Christian experience too God in his wisdom gives us to taste the bitterness of Mara the difficult things of life so that the elams that he has for us will taste all the more sweet that they will be themselves enhanced if you like by the fact that we know already what the opposite to them is and surely that's something that's also included in that final passage of scripture in revelation or very near the end of scripture in revelation chapter 21 where the

Lord is describing there for us the final conditions of heaven for the Lord's people and among the many other things he says is the following I heard a loud voice from the throne saying behold the dwelling place of God is with man he will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will be with them as their God he will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore for the former things have passed away that's only meaningful if you know something of what tears and death and mourning and crying and pain have been like and it's only as we know that that we will come all the more to appreciate what it will be like when God wipes away every tear from our eyes when our manner is finally and permanently turned to an eternal elam of satisfaction let's pray

Lord our God help us to be thankful for the way in which you order and purpose our lives help us to be thankful that you have not left us to arrange the aspects of our experience for ourselves because we know Lord that we would not have chosen many of the things that you have chosen for us we pray Lord that you would teach us through all the circumstances of life together both the comforts and the testings and the trials and help us we pray as we experience these to depend upon you as much in one as in the other and enable us Lord as we go through the circumstances of life that we will do so knowing that we are pilgrims on a journey and that at journey's ends the former things will have passed away and you will have taken us into that healing of your glory help us we pray to rejoice in your redemption and to continue to obey you in all your ways receive our thanks hear our prayers for

[37 : 04] Jesus sake Amen