

Call to Obedience #304
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Bitter Waters

By Reimar Schultze

“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 shewed 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 proved them.”—Exodus 15: 22-25

Did you ever taste bitter waters? Did you ever have a bitter experience? Were you ever disappointed - deeply disappointed? Did you ever have your expectations shattered in your marriage, your job, with church members, or with a man of God? Are you with me? Am I dealing with life as it really is? I don't think that there is a person in the world who has never come to a well of bitter waters. The experience is even more painful if you come upon bitter waters when you are thirsty, desperate, and destitute. Bitter waters are the most disappointing when you need more help than ever and when your physical, emotional, and spiritual resources are spent. If any of what I am saying speaks to you then read on.

Remember when you had the joy of the Lord? Remember when you did sing the praises of God from morning until night? Remember when you witnessed out of the overflow and not out of a sense of duty? Yes, I know that you had such an experience at one time or another and it was real, real, real. Let me tell you when you had such an experience. You had it when you first got saved. When you could sing: “Gone, gone, gone, yes, all my sins are gone.” Some of you can also remember other experiences in the Holy Spirit when the Lord did marvelous things for you.

Now we are ready to get into the meat of our text. A great deliverance preceded the experience of the bitter waters of Marah. Israel had just passed through the Red Sea on dry ground. Ten mighty miracles lay behind them, but this one was actually the sum of all the past ten. All the ten miracles led up to this. This was the grand crescendo of the whole concert of deliverance. All the ten prior miracles were given in order to accomplish Israel's separation from the slavery, the ungodliness, and the injustice of Egypt to serve the living God. Not only did Israel now finally, after 400 years, experience this separation, but on top of that, they saw the whole Egyptian army including stiff-necked Pharaoh and his chariots cast into the sea. No wonder they were singing the Song of Moses: “the horse and his rider hath he cast into the sea” (Exodus 15:1). How can you help but sing under such circumstances? How can you help but want to tell the whole world about it? Indeed, not only did they sing, but also they danced and dear sister Miriam, the prophetess, out-danced them all. Have you ever been in such a place of overflowing joy? Yes, hallelujah what precious memories.

But now behold the next verse after “the horse and ride hath he cast into the sea” (v.1), “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” (v.22). Finally Israel is on the way to the Promised Land. Everyone felt good, looked good, and expected more good, and blessings to abound in the future. Everyone said, perhaps, if this is the beginning of the journey to Canaan, what will happen next as we get closer to the Promised Land?

Yet, my friend, don't you know that after the blessing comes the testing time?

So the first day of freedom from slavery went by. They were carrying their little ones, driving their oxen, and leading their sheep on dusty hard-pan soil. As they traveled, they all looked for water. The joy of yesterday began to wear off as they ate of their provisions that night, and their talk was about water. Now they no longer reviewed what God had done at the Red Sea. The significance of the crossing over was no longer upon their hearts. The second day was worse than the first. Being partially dehydrated, their feet began to drag even more, and they looked for water around every knoll. But, alas, on the third day, they were nearly fainting yet still there was no water. By now the Red Sea experience, the greatness of God's love and care as they had experienced it in the past was forgotten. The song of Moses was sung no more.

The Bible says, “and they went three days in the wilderness, and found no water” (v.22). Oh, how many times have you been famished, dehydrated, and lacking for what you wanted in your spiritual life? Now then, who is to blame for no water? Is it your fault? Is there something that you have done wrong? Is there a hidden sin you have not confessed? Are you being punished for something you did twenty years ago? It is only natural that the people of God will try to find fault with themselves when they run out of water.

Or perhaps it is something else? The amazing thing about this story is that it was not their fault that they found no water, nor that of Moses. It was God's perfect will that they found no water for three days. How do we know this? We know because a cloud was leading them in the daytime and a pillar of fire at night. God led them through this wilderness where there was no water.

My friend, there are times when God wants you to go without water. All mature saints know that when such times come, and there is no consciousness of sin in your life, you are being tested and prepared for greater trials and greater battles and greater victories. Do not chafe when there is no water. Sometimes, you may be without water for days, weeks, months, or years. This does not mean that God has forsaken you, but only that God is preparing and molding you to bring you more into his likeness. The greater and the more enduring the testings, the more God has in his plans for you. The more he covets to draw you closer to his heart that you may become His all in all. Madame Guyon the great French saint had many years of no refreshing water, but it was in that time that she found the glory and sweetness of the cross. Do not despise the chastening of the Lord, and do not try to go back to spiritual experiences of the past. Let Egypt be history, and let the crossing of the Red Sea be history. Your life is in the future. God has better things ahead for you. He has other songs for you to sing besides the songs of Moses, if you will only refrain from complaining and murmuring and stay on the rejoicing side.

On the third day they found water! Perhaps it was in the afternoon or evening. Oh, the joy on their faces when they saw a pool of water glittering in the sun ahead of them. They ran as fast as their weakened condition allowed to reach this water. Oh, what a cry of despair, disappointment, and anger came after their first taste. It was bitter! Have you ever gone through a dry spell, and just when you think you are getting out of it, you run into a bitter experience?

Are you still with me my brother and my sister? My friend, Israel was only three days in the wilderness and this was her first experience with God's leading, with God being fully in charge. As yet there was no bread from heaven and they had been without water, and now the first water they tasted was bitter. A wonderful experience was behind them, it looked like only misery was ahead of them.

It says: "And the people murmured against Moses, saying, What shall we drink?" (v.24) In other words the water was not drinkable. They blamed Moses for their trouble but in reality Moses had nothing to do with it.

God led them to these waters. When you are in the midst of a hard, trying experience don't judge that experience. It is too early to do so. Don't murmur, rather review all that God has done for you in the past and that way you may keep the victory. Someday you will understand why God put you into that hard place. Someday you will see his divine love and wisdom in it and praise him for it.

In retrospect, we can see it all coming together, giving God the glory. Moses prayed. Why didn't they all pray? Had they all prayed they would not have murmured in the camp. Instead they could all have been part of a new victory celebration. Prayer changes things. Prayer works miracles.

"And he cried unto the Lord; and the Lord shewed 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 proved them" (v.25).

The tree, my friend, represents the cross on which Jesus died. Jesus can make bitter waters become sweet. And when you take up your cross and deny self you get to drink of these sweet waters. Moses denied self, he crucified the complaining spirit and experienced the joy of the Lord.

The first thing God wants us to see after we have been born again is the cross. We cannot just be born again and expect "joy" to flow through us continually. Joy will only continue to flow through us as we continue to stay on the cross and follow Jesus. So, that was lesson number one for the congregation of Israel after they were saved. It is the cross that gives life.

Of course they could not see this typology then, but we can see it today because the darkness is past and the new light now shineth. Here at Marah (bitter waters) God gave an ordinance to the church universal that divine life comes through the cross.

It says here, "there he made for them a statute and an ordinance" (v.25). I would not be surprised to find out that when Jesus opened the understanding of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus after the resurrection, that he shared this story with them so that they would see the cross.

It says: "And he said unto them, These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled., which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me. Then opened he their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures" (Luke 24: 44, 45).

Do you get this? Jesus said that all you see in the Law of Moses and the prophets are pointing to him. Everything is about him. Now, do you see that the tree mentioned here is the cross? God wants to teach new converts, who were baptized into Christ's death, that the only way they can get through the wilderness and into the Promised Land is by the cross. That is why God made this an ordinance. An ordinance is a prominent rule of action established by a sovereign. Yes, in the cross of Christ I glory, because it brings me into the Promised Land.

"But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world" (Galatians 6:14).

The cross says "no" to complainers, "no" to sin, "no" to the world and to man's way of doing things. This is what you and I need to do to get to Canaan - take up the cross. It says God proved them there. God will prove you, and he will put you into dry places to prove you. He will lead you to bitter waters to prove you, so that you will find out who you are and what God can do to change you. Stop fussing. You need dry spells and bitter waters as the day needs the night.

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