

Bitter Water Made Sweet

TEXT: Ex 15:22-27

PHBF 4.15.12

Scr. Reading: Ex 15:22-27

Getting Out: Exodus, pt 1

SOS VERSE: Psalm 67:1 *May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us...*

[watching family videos]

Israel is in her infancy. If the plagues and Red Sea were Israel's birth, these are now the first months of her new life. God is taking her by the hand and teaching her to walk. His educational method? Hardship. His classroom? The wilderness. Spurgeon called the wilderness "the Oxford and Cambridge for God's students. There they went to the University, and he taught and trained them, and they took their degree before they entered into the promised land." ("Marah Better Than Elim")

Her first lesson requires her to learn that she lives always before the face of God. Everything she experiences and does has relation to Him. And so God patiently and lovingly shows her who He is and what she can expect from Him. These are the basics, the first principles of Christian growth.

THE LESSON OF THE HEART

Three days out from the Red Sea, and not a drop of water along the way. Three days without replenishing your water is reasonable cause for alarm. They had likely consumed all their portable water supplies. Thus, finding the water of Marah undrinkable wasn't simply disappointing; it was cause for panic!

Naturally, the people react: "What shall we drink?" It's a reasonable question, and there's nothing wrong with it in itself. The problem is in their attitude, their heart (v 24): "the people grumbled."

Very quickly we're going to see that this becomes a pattern:

- Ex 16:3 – grumbling about lack of food
- Ex 17:3 – grumbling about lack of water
- Numbers – grumbling about food, water, Moses and Aaron's

leadership, the size of the people in the Promised Land
So much whining! So childish. It's no stretch to say we're dealing with Israel in her infancy. All this whining proves it.

But there's something going on here at a deeper level. Notice:

Exodus 15:25b *There the LORD made for them a statute and a rule, and there he tested them...*

The statute and rule is listed in v 26, but the test is this experience itself: how will they respond to the bitter water? The Lord arranges tests like this often:

Exodus 16:4 *Then the LORD said to Moses, "Behold, I am about to rain bread from heaven for you, and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in my law or not.*

Exodus 20:18-20 *Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off...²⁰ Moses said to the people, "Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin."*

Deuteronomy 8:2 *And you shall remember the whole way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not.*

(cf. Gen 22:1 – Abraham)

This experience isn't simply a moment of misfortune. It's a test, an examination, a divine investigation. A test for what? NOT for God's benefit, to see if His people are worthy of his help or blessing. It's a test for their benefit, to see what is going on in their heart.

Look at what this test revealed about their hearts: forgetfulness, selfishness, ungratefulness, immaturity, unbelief. These heart problems weren't apparent on the surface. It took the test, the experience of hardship, to draw them out and make them obvious.

But there's an even deeper reality here that lies underneath this whole test. Verse 24 says they grumbled against Moses, but remember who led them here. They were following the pillar of cloud and fire. God brought them here, not Moses. They direct their anger at Moses, but the real target is God. And Moses knows it (cf. the next story):

Exodus 16:2, 8 ² And the whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness... ⁸ And Moses said, "When the LORD gives you in the evening meat to eat and in the morning bread to the full, because the LORD has heard your grumbling that you grumble against him- what are we? Your grumbling is not against us but against the LORD."

They aren't accusing Moses; they're accusing God. This moment isn't about Israel and their needs. It's not even about Israel and their heart; it's about Israel and their God. Every moment is.

Coram Deo is the phrase theologians use: "before the face of God." R. C. Sproul calls *coram Deo* "the big idea" and "the essence of the Christian life." It's the realization that every moment of our lives is lived in some kind of relation to God. Not "personal relationship" with God in the Christian sense, but personhood as fundamentally related-to-God in every sense. We never simply "experience life." We always experience life in some kind of relation to God.

What they wanted wasn't the problem. God provided it in the end. It was the attitude they had toward HIM that was the problem. Israel did not experience lack of water on their own. They experienced it before the face of God. If we understand *coram Deo*, we'll see that there is more going on here than natural survival instincts or a little immature whining. The most significant part of this experience is what it says about their relationship with God. Do they believe He is near? That He cares? That He is able? That He is in control? They are not experiencing this crisis for themselves, all alone, in the raw. They are experiencing it in relation to God.

This is how life is. It's part of what it means to be human. We live always before the face of God. We never grumble all to ourselves; we grumble only in relation to God. We fear, rejoice, make plans, and live always in relation to God.

Here is Lesson 1 of the Christian life: *coram Deo*. We live every moment before the face of God, with our heart postured in some relation to Him. To expose our heart, God is more than willing to sacrifice our personal comfort, push our buttons, and stress us out. It's His test, to reveal what

we need to see about ourselves so we can repent and yield new territory in our hearts to Him. He wants to capture the hearts of His people so they will love and serve Him alone.

ILL: my experience with the 2 vehicles blowing up within months of each other, only months after I complained that at least my vehicles weren't ruined by the sacrifices we were making for God I was learning *coram Deo* all over again. God brought a test to teach what was in my heart in relation to Him.

God's testing isn't a spot check to see if we really mean business. He knows full well that we don't. It's his way of ridding us of self-centered perceived "needs" and teaching us instead to turn our eyes upward to the God who has committed himself to care for us and bring us to the Promised Land.

THE LESSON OF OBEDIENCE

Moses had the same problem the people did, materially speaking. He couldn't drink the water either. But instead of joining them in grumbling, he prayed. The Lord heard and "showed him a log/tree" to throw in the water to sweeten it. There's no natural explanation for this. It was a miracle. The theological point is plain: God commanded and Moses obeyed. Simple as that. Moses is willing to do whatever he God commands, even without understanding why. He's more than the people's mediator and savior here. In his obedience, he's their example.

The Lord didn't want them to miss this lesson, so He interpreted the moment for them. Verse 25 says He explicitly spelled it out as "a statute and a rule." What's the rule? Verse 26 gives it in four iterations:

- "diligently listen to the voice of the Lord your God"
- "do that which is right in his eyes"
- "give ear to his commandments"
- "keep all his statutes"

Notice especially the contrast between eyes and ears in the middle iterations: "do that which is right in his eyes and give ear to his commandments" (NIV = "pay attention" rather than "give ear"). Right in whose eyes? God's. Open whose ears? Theirs. It's a helpful way to think of obedience: ask yourself "whose eyes and whose ears?". The eyes are

the organ of perception, desire. The ears are the organ of reception. Disobedience happens when we swap them – instead of opening our ears to receive what appears best in God’s eyes, we close our ears and pursue what looks good in our eyes.

So the Lord lays down this statute: “Listen to me. Obey my word. Keep my laws.” Simple obedience. It’s what the Lord expects of His people, not as a *means of salvation* but as a *response to salvation*. They were already redeemed, delivered from the Egyptians through the Red Sea. Salvation was theirs. Now they must obey in response.

Of course, this is the one thing Israel simply cannot do—keep God’s commands. After a short stint at Elim (v 27), they set out again, encounter a need (food), and immediately set to complaining (16:2-3). God meets their need, they move on, and soon encounter another one: water. Have they learned their lesson? No. More complaining (17:1-2). They aren’t learning the lesson of obedience. ...which shows how badly they need the lesson of grace.

THE LESSON OF GRACE

Notice that the Lord doesn’t punish them for their arrogance and sin. He meets their need, and then He instructs them. Their grumbling becomes a teaching opportunity. He shows them the path to more blessing: “Obey, don’t doubt. My eyes. Your ears.”

This whole scene is marked by grace. God arranged a test – bitter water – to reveal to these people what was in their heart: self-will, self-sovereignty, self-sufficiency. He then challenged them to repent of the sins of the self-life and surrender to His lordship by keeping His word. If they would do that, they could be assured that He would take care of their needs – i.e., get them the things they were wanting to begin with. What grace!

But it goes even deeper than that. Think again about their sin—complaining. Remember, these hardships are God’s test for the people. But when they respond by complaining, in effect, they turn the test back on Him.

Exodus 17:2b *And Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me?"*

Why do you test the LORD?"

Their complaints challenge God, demand that He prove Himself to them, and suspend faith until He does. It’s an arrogant reversal of roles. And they do it again and again and again.

We do this all the time with our words: Complaining words test God. “This (kid, wife, job, person) makes me so mad” points the finger at God who ordained these circumstances. “I would give more time/money to the church if I had a little more” indicts God, who hasn’t provided well enough for you. Words like this make God the scapegoat. It’s obvious why complaining in these circumstances is so deeply sinful.

Words that test God make Him the scapegoat. The gospel is the good news that, for that one moment in time, He agreed. Jesus Christ became the scapegoat. Instead of crushing us for our arrogant, sinful complaints, He agreed with them. He took the blame for our problems, our sins, our complaints, even though none of them were His fault.

It’s the lesson of grace. It’s the greatest lesson will ever learn. In fact, it will take us all eternity to learn it fully:

Ephesians 2:4-7 ⁴ *But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ- by grace you have been saved- ⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.*

Why? Blessed to be a blessing.

Psalm 67:1-2 *May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, Selah ² that your way may be known on earth, your saving power among all nations.*

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