

UNIT 28
WHEN GOD GIVES BITTER WATER
TO HIS THIRSTY PEOPLE
(Exodus 15:22-27)

INTRODUCTION¹

Text and Textual Notes

¹ The first event of the Israelites' desert experience is a failure, for they murmur against Yahweh and are given a stern warning--and the provision of sweet water. The event teaches that God is able to turn bitter water into sweet water for His people, and promises to do such things if they obey. He can provide for them in the desert--He did not bring them into the desert to let them die. But there is a deeper level to this story--the healing of the water is incidental to the healing of the people, their lack of trust.

The passage is arranged in a neat chiasm, starting with a journey (A), ending with the culmination of the journey (A'), developing to bitter water (B), resolving to sweet water (B'), leading to complaints by the people (C), which corresponds to the instructions for the people (C'), and the central turning point is the wonder miracle (D).

15:22 Then Moses caused Israel to journey² from Yam Suph, and they went out into the desert of Shur. They went three days³ into the desert, and they found no water. **15:23** Then they came to Marah,⁴ but they were not able to drink⁵ the waters of Marah, because⁶ they were bitter.⁷ That is⁸ why its name was⁹ called Marah.

² The verb form is unusual; the normal expression is with the *qal* which expresses that they journeyed. But here the *hiphil* is used to underscore that Moses caused them to journey--and he is following God. So the point is that God was leading Israel to the bitter water.

³ The clause says “and they went three days into the desert.” The point of this note is not to state how long they had been traveling, but how far they went into the desert (adverbial accusative). The statement is deliberately intended to recall Moses’ demand that they go three days into the wilderness to worship. Here, three days in, they find bitter water and murmur--not worship.

⁴ The Hebrew word means “bitter.” This motif will be repeated four times in this passage to mark the central problem. Earlier in the book the word had been used for the “bitter herbs” in the passover, recalling the bitter labor in bondage. So there may be a double reference here--to the bitter waters and to Egypt itself--God can deliver from either.

⁵ The infinitive construct here provides the direct object for the verb “to be able,” answering the question of what they were not able to do.

⁶ The causal clause here provides the reason for their being unable to drink the water, as well as a clear motivation for the name.

⁷ Many scholars, like Kaiser, follow the old liberal traditions in explaining these things with natural phenomena. Here Marah is identified with Ain Hawarah. It is said that the waters of this well are notoriously salty and brackish; Robinson said it was six to eight feet in diameter and the water about two feet deep; the water is unpleasant, salty, and somewhat bitter. As a result the Arabs say it is the worst tasting water in the area (Kaiser, p. 398). But that would not be a sufficient amount of water for the number of Israelites in the first place; and in the second, they could not drink it at all. But third, how did Moses change it?

⁸ The ‘*al-ken*’ formula in the Pentateuch serves to explain to the reader the reason for the way things were. It does not necessarily mean here that Israel named the place--but they certainly could have.

⁹ Literally, “one called its name,” the expression can be translated as a passive verb if the subject is not expressed.

15:24 So the people murmured¹⁰ against Moses, saying, “What can¹¹ we drink?”
15:25 He cried out¹² to Yahweh, and Yahweh showed him¹³ a tree.¹⁴ When he cast it into the waters, the waters were sweetened. There he made for them¹⁵ a binding ordinance,¹⁶ and there He tested¹⁷ them; **15:26** and said, “If you will

¹⁰ The verb *wayyillonu* (from *lun*) is a much stronger word than “to grumble” or “to complain.” It is used only in these wilderness wandering stories for the “rebellion” of the Israelites against God. They were not merely complaining--they were questioning God’s abilities and motives. The action is something like a parliamentary vote of no confidence.

¹¹ The imperfect tense here should be given a potential nuance: “What can we drink? Since the previous verse reports that they were not able to drink the water.

It is likely that Moses uses words very much like this when he prayed. The difference seems to lie in the prepositions--he cried “unto” Yahweh, but they murmured “against” Moses.

¹² Literally, “and he cried out”

¹³ The verb is *wayyorehu*, “and he showed him.” It is the *hiphil* preterite from *yarah*, which has a basic meaning of “to point, show, direct.” It then came to mean “to teach”; it is the verb behind the noun “Law” (*torah*).

sn/ Cassuto notes that here is the clue to the direction of the narrative: Israel needed God’s instruction, the Law, if they were going to enjoy His provisions (p. 184).

¹⁴ Driver, of course, follows some local legends in identifying this tree as one that is supposed to have--even to this day--the properties necessary for making bitter water sweet (p. 143). Jacob reports that no such tree has ever been found; but then he adds that this does not mean there was not such a bush in the earlier days. He believes that here God used a natural means (“showed, instructed”) to sweeten the water. He quotes Ben Sira as saying God had created these things with healing properties in them (p. 436).

¹⁵ Literally, “for him” (Israel)

¹⁶ This translation interprets the two nouns as a hendiadys: “a statute and an ordinance” becomes “a binding ordinance.”

¹⁷ The verb *nissahu*, “and he tested him [them]” is from the root *nasah*. The use of this word in the Bible shows that there is question, doubt, or uncertainty about the object being tested.

The passage means that the whole episode was a test from God. He led them there through Moses, and let them go hungry and thirsty. He wanted to see how great their faith was. In this first test God gives them instruction on how to avoid the diseases of Egypt; but in

diligently obey¹⁸ Yahweh your God, and do that which is right¹⁹ in His eyes, and give ear²⁰ to His commandments, and keep all His statutes, then all²¹ the diseases²² which I put on the Egyptians I will not put on you, for I Yahweh am your healer.”²³

15:27 Then they came to Elim,²⁴ where there were twelve wells of water, and seventy palm trees. And they camped there by the waters.

subsequent passages He simply carries out His wrath.

¹⁸ The construction uses the infinitive absolute and the imperfect tense of *shama*‘. The meaning of the verb is idiomatic here because it is followed by “to the voice of Yahweh your God.” When this is present, the verb is translated “obey.” The construction is in a causal clause. It reads, “If you will diligently obey.” Gesenius points out that the infinitive absolute in a conditional clause also emphasizes the importance of the condition on which the consequence depends (GKC, par. 113o).

¹⁹ The word order is reversed in the text: “and the right you do” or, “[if] you do what is right in His eyes.” The conditional idea in the first clause is continued here in this clause.

²⁰ This verb and the next are both perfect tenses with the *waw* consecutive; they continue the sequence of the original conditional clause.

²¹ The substantive “all of” (*kol*) in a negative clause can be translated “none of.”

²² The reference is no doubt to the plagues that Yahweh has just put on them. These will not come upon God’s true people. But the interesting thing about a conditional clause like this is that the opposite is also true--if you do not obey, then I will bring these diseases.”

²³ The form is *roph^e’eka*, the participle with the suffix. The word is the predicate after the pronoun: “I [am] your healer.” The suffix will be the objective genitive--God heals them.

This name comes as a bit of a surprise to the reader. One would expect, “I am Yahweh who heals your water”; but it was the people He came to heal, because their faith was weak. God will let Israel know here that He can control the elements of nature to bring about a spiritual response in Israel (see Deut. 8).

²⁴ Judging from the way the story is told they were not far from the oasis. But God had other plans for them, to see if they would trust Him wholeheartedly and obey. They did not do so well this first time, but this is the introduction to the wilderness, and they will have to learn how to obey. The lesson is clear: God uses adversity to test His people’s loyalty. The response to adversity must be prayer to God, for He can turn the bitter into the sweet, the bad into the good, and the prospect of death into life.

EXPOSITORY DEVELOPMENT

“When the Lord Gives His Thirsty People Bitter Water to Drink”

Exodus 15:22-27

Introduction

How believers respond to adversity is indicative of the quality of their faith. It is thrilling to hear of faith so strong that it can endure courageously the distressing situations of life. But it is far more common to discover that believers, who otherwise live obediently and faithfully in the faith, become bitter and turn to complaining in the time of testing.

In his book, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, William Law says,

A dull, uneasy, complaining spirit, which is sometimes the spirit of those that seem careful of religion, is of all tempers the most contrary to religion, for it disowns the God who it pretends to adore. He who believes that everything happens to him for the best cannot possibly complain for lack of something better. If you, therefore, live in murmurings and complaints, it is not because you are a weak, infirm creature; it is because you lack the first principle of religion--a right belief in God. As thankfulness is an express acknowledgment of the goodness of God, even so complaints are plain accusations of God's lack of goodness to you.

There are many passages of Scripture that address the issue of the believer's response to adversity, but few are as poignant as Exodus 15:22-27. The story is about Israel's response to the LORD's test of their faith, but it is timeless in its message. St. Paul, noting that these stories were written for the admonition of those on whom the ends of the ages have come, warns the Church against murmuring as they murmured (1 Cor. 10:10,11).

This little story marks the beginning of a new stage in Israel's development.

It is the first incident in the experience of the freed people, for it follows immediately after the “Song of Salvation” at the Sea. But what a contrast! The waters of death for the Egyptians prompted a song of victory, but the bitter waters in the wilderness brought murmuring from the people of God. In three short days they were reduced to the complaining that would characterize their wilderness experience.

The story is written symmetrically to focus our attention on the central miracle. Note that the first scene of wandering contrasts with the seventh scene of rest; the second scene of finding bitter water contrasts with the sixth scene of finding sweet water and palm trees; and the third scene of their murmuring in unbelief contrasts with the fifth scene about the instruction for belief. But the fourth scene about the LORD's miracle stands alone. It is central to the story, focusing our attention on what the LORD is able to do. It forms the turning point in the narrative: everything up to this point forms the tension, and everything after it records the resolution of the tension. Once again, divine intervention makes the difference.

The story follows the pattern of biblical narrative in that the lesson is based on the act of God on behalf of His people. The incident serves as the vehicle for the instruction. Brought to their extremities after three days of waterless wanderings, Israel found only bitter water to drink. In despair they complained against Moses. They were ripe for the lesson. They had to learn that God's provision and protection depended on obedience to the Law. The point of the miracle is that God is able to make the bitter sweet, the bad good, and the prospect of death into the reality of life (cf. Gen. 50:20); the point is that such provision is contingent upon obedience.

There are several features to this passage that should be mentioned. First, this is a wilderness story. That is where Israel often saw God's wonders, that is, where they came to know what God could do for them. Although the wilderness experiences provided Israel with the opportunity to develop their confidence in God, the reports of these experiences are cast in the themes of disobedience and punishment. Second, the editorial comment in verse 25 explains that this was a test. Such tests are situated designed by God to measure the degree of faith the people had. Third, this is one of the many murmuring passages. There are about a dozen of these; they all include complaining over the physical conditions in the wilderness. The murmuring usually leads to mediation, and the mediation to a

gracious act and a lesson. The cycle is repeated again and again. The numerous stories remind Israel of her ancestor's unbelief. And fourth, the story has a heavy concentration of legal terminology in it--statute, ordinance, command, law.

So this little passage calls people to obey the Word of the LORD by showing them how the LORD tests the faith of His people in order to convince them that He can be trusted and obeyed.

The narrative may be divided into four parts: the murmuring in the wilderness, the miraculous intervention, the demand for obedience, and the encampment by Elim.

Exposition

I. God's people must respond to physical adversity (22-24).

One of the frequently recurring themes of the Bible is that believers experience sufferings and calamities in this life. There are times when the adversity is divine discipline for sin. That is one thing. But there are times when the people of God who are faithfully following the LORD's directions encounter severe difficulties in life. Such is the setting of this report.

A. God often leads His people into physical adversity (22,23).

That this story records the experience of adversity is clear from the reading of it. That the LORD led the people into the difficulty is not immediately obvious.

Two observations are necessary to establish this point. First, the text is stressing that Moses caused Israel to journey in this direction. Second, the account of the Exodus makes it clear that Moses was simply God's representative, and that the decisions for the journey were made by the LORD Himself (cf. Exod. 13:21,22). When the text says that Moses led the people to a certain place, it means that Moses led them where the LORD wanted them to go.

In this case the leading of the LORD was into the wilderness. The structure of verse 22 keeps the wilderness motif in the mind of the reader and culminates in the report that they found no water. Their travels would have been complicated by the prolonged deprivation of this basic need for survival, and their feelings

intensified by the gnawing memory of all that water at the Red Sea. So the tension would mount with each passing day--the LORD was leading them, but they were getting more and more thirsty each day.

This search for water continued for three days. The point of this time notice is not simply to stress the endurance of the people. It had been the request of Israel that Pharaoh should release them from bondage so that they could go a distance of three days into the wilderness to sacrifice to the LORD (Exod. 5:3; 8:23). Thus, it may be suspected that the LORD was meeting their aspiration with adversity. If in three days they found no water, would they still worship?

If in verse 22 the Israelites were looking to worship but found no water, in verse 23 when they were looking for water they found Marah. This place had water, but it was undrinkably bitter! The verse heightens this aspect of their dilemma by the fourfold repetition of the word for "bitter," which is the name "Marah."

The line says, "They came to 'Bitter,' but they were not able to drink the water from 'Bitter,' because it was bitter; that is why the place was called 'Bitter'."

The point of the dilemma could not be stressed more forcefully--when the people desperately need water in the wilderness, God led them to bitter, undrinkable water.

What a lasting impression that must have made on Israel! It was bad enough to commemorate the experience by naming the place "Marah"--Bitter. People often recall times and places by such events. "That was the year my brother died." Or, "That was where the car broke down." The wilderness wanderings of ancient Israel are blotched with such namings: Marah, where they murmured over the bitter water; Taberah, "burning," where the fire of the LORD burnt a portion of the camp; Kibroth-hattawah, "the graves of those who craved" for the food of Egypt; Massah and Meribah, "tempting" and "striving," where Israel provoked the LORD to anger so that they were condemned to wander in the wilderness. What tragic reminders of the important events on their journeys. They are lasting monuments to failure.

We must not be too hard on the Israelites. It is awfully difficult to pursue resolutely a pattern of worship and obedience when confronted with physical adversity. We have trouble even when we have a headache. How many students come to seminary with great expectations and great enthusiasm. They have all the

anticipation of this ancient people redeemed from bondage and eager to start a new life in the service of God. But it is not too long before the LORD directs them to some bitter water just when they become very thirsty. Their bitter water could be financial troubles, sicknesses, or various other disappointments and apparently counter-productive frustrations. What then becomes of the worship and obedience?

B. God's people often respond with murmuring (24).

According to verse 24, when the people asked Moses what they could drink they were murmuring against him. In other words, it was no simple question. It was not what they asked that was the problem--the question seems reasonable enough--but how they asked it. They murmured. And even though the text says that they murmured against Moses, the LORD will later explain that they did not murmur against Moses but against the LORD Himself (Exod. 16:8).

Our English translation “murmur,” or even “complain,” does not capture the significance of this term. This was no mere grumbling, no simple expression of frustration, no legitimate complaint. It was a display of unbelief. It was an expression of disloyalty, for to murmur against the LORD or against the LORD's chosen leader in these accounts was a denial of God's goodness, God's power, God's love, and God's sovereignty. In some respects it is like the vote of no-confidence that can take place in British Parliament, through which new elections can be called and new leaders chosen. In the wilderness at one such murmuring they did want to choose new leaders and go back to Egypt.

One would think that this nation would have learned of God's ability to protect and provide for His covenant people through the experience at the great Exodus. But the physical need of water so keenly felt after three days has clouded their perspective, and they failed to believe. If they had been loyal to the covenant they would have expressed their problem through prayer. But in this case, and in many others in the wilderness, they lost confidence in God's ability to maintain them in their adversity, and in God's goodness in bringing them to this point. So they murmured against Moses--but it was actually against the LORD.

So too do believers today murmur and complain in their hearts when their circumstances are frustrating and perplexing. There is normal complaining in life about circumstances; but this goes beyond that to expressions of unbelief. What

often happens is that people may complain first against some minister or leader upon whom they may pin the blame, often creating real unrest in the Church; but they really are questioning the goodness and the ability of God. If this is not dealt with properly, it can ruin the spiritual life of the community.

II. God can remove the physical adversity (25a).

The proper response to such adversity and the solution for it are recorded in the first half of verse 25.

A. Prayer is the proper response to adversity.

In response to the murmuring complaint of the people, Moses mediates for them through prayer. What is interesting to me is that what he said to the LORD must have been very similar to the content of their complaint—"What can we drink?" But the contrast is rather pointed. They murmured **against** Moses and the LORD, but Moses cried out **to** the LORD. The change in verbs and prepositions is most instructive. The response of prayer, actually here a cry out of distress, is a recognition that only God is able to solve the problem. If only God can solve the problem, then murmuring **against** Him will not help. Only prayer will work. If murmuring is an expression of disloyalty to the covenant and unbelief, prayer is the demonstration of loyalty and belief.

B. Divine intervention can resolve the difficulty.

According to this story the LORD showed Moses a tree or wood that sweetened the water. The action is so simple, and the words so common, that it is probably impossible to say what actually happened. Was the bitterness due to something in the water? Was this a certain kind of tree that would counteract the bitterness? Many commentators down through the ages have speculated about this transaction, but none has come to a plausible explanation. All that can be said is that God intervened in answer to the prayer with a miraculous sweetening of the water.

One gains the impression that this is often the way that God desires to work with His people. He had brought them to their wits' ends in the wilderness so that He could display His power when they cried to Him. It must be said, however, that there may be times when He will not resolve the problem. It is the age old

understanding of prayer: God can intervene, but may choose at times not to do so. Here He did intervene.

The way that the text describes the LORD's response is instructive. The term translated “he showed” is an unusual use of a common biblical term, a term that is etymologically related to the word for Law--the *torah*. Of course, the word means that the LORD **showed** him in some way the tree; but the choice of this word suggests that the greater showing or instructing, that is, the Law, would be the means of divine provision, as verse 26 will state so forcefully. Indeed, man would live not by bread alone, but by every word that proceeded from the LORD.

So the bitter water was made sweet by the LORD. The story, being part of the legal literature of Israel, is saying much more than at such and such a time in the desert God did an amazing thing. It is, in general, saying that God is able to make the bitter sweet, the bad good, and the prospect of death life. He had already changed the bitterness of Egypt (note the “bitter herbs” in Exod. 12:8) into great triumph. He can give them food and drink in the desert. In fact, he can by such miracles and lessons transform his people.

III. God demands allegiance to His sovereignty (25b-26).

A. God instructs through tests (25b).

The nature and purpose of this account is now explained by the second half of verse 25: God made a statute there and tested them. The explanation is inserted after the miraculous intervention and prior to the instruction as a transitional comment.

To say that there the LORD “tested” Israel is to explain the purpose of the incident. Now we know why God led them there. This verb “test” is an important one in the biblical narratives. It always conveys a sense of doubt, or at least a question about the desired response. Here it describes how the LORD led thirsty Israel to bitter water to see if they would respond by faith. By this we may learn that physical adversity may be a test of our faith.

B. God conditions preservation on obedience (26).

Verse 26 reports in the words of the LORD the lesson of the passage and the

point of the testing experience. If Israel obediently follows the instructions of their covenant God, then they will be preserved from the diseases of Egypt.

What these diseases are is not explicitly stated. The fundamental question is whether the narrator is linking the diseases of Egypt with the bitter water test. It seems likely that such is the case, because the term “bitter” was earlier used to represent their suffering in Egypt (Exod. 12:8). So all the sufferings in Egypt, their oppression and even the plagues, are in view. God can protect His people from these.

The reason that God can make such a claim is because of His nature as their Healer. The revelation of God as the One who heals is also in other passages. Psalm 103:3 records that it is the LORD “who heals all your diseases.” In Exodus itself it says that God “will bless your bread and your water” and “take away sickness” (23:25). Ezekiel also spoke of God's healing, but connected it to the waters as well: “and the waters shall be healed” (47:8).

In this passage, however, the direction is different: it is “your healer,” not the “one who heals the water.” This could simply mean “I AM the LORD your healer” who heals things (like water). Or, it may mean, “I AM the LORD who heals you.” Given the nature of this story as a test, the latter makes better sense. The usage of the word for healing often includes the healing of the cause for the sickness or suffering, that is, the forgiveness of sin or removal of unbelief. Through miraculous interventions like this narrative reports, God will show Himself as the Healer of His people.

How does the LORD heal His people?

This wonderful promise is conditioned upon their obedience. The text greatly emphasizes this by stating the condition four times: “diligently obey,” “do what is right,” “give ear to His commands,” and “keep all His statutes.” There is no doubt about their covenant responsibilities. Whatever God says to do, they must do, for He is the LORD.

How is this connected to the narrative? Did they not obey the LORD in some way? Probably not, in view of the murmuring. Had they been diligently listening to the voice of the LORD and doing what was right in His eyes, they would have prayed as Moses did, rather than challenge His goodness and His

ability.

So the test set a precedent for the nation, as the legal terminology suggests. Through the test God was making the people aware that they were His servants and totally dependent on Him. The lesson drawn vividly from it all was that God demanded loyal obedience from them.

IV. God ultimately leads to rest (27).

The story concludes with Israel's removal to Elim where they found proof of divine blessing. There they camped, the first stage of their wilderness trek over. But they had not fared well in this first test--necessitating that there would be more tests.

Conclusion

Throughout this narrative the reader is impressed by the sovereignty and majesty of the LORD. He leads His people into difficulty, only to resolve the problem and use the experience to make promises for future protection and preservation--promises that would be based on their obedience to His Word. But all of it is based on His powerful abilities.

The basic lesson that comes through is that **God uses adversity to test His people's loyalty**. When Israel came to this barren wilderness, they murmured and wished to return to what they thought to be an easier life. But God said to them, "I AM the good and sovereign LORD your God; I knew when I called you to Myself that there would be this wilderness out here; I knew you'd find bitter water to drink here, while others gorged themselves in the delights of Egypt; I knew you were going to have hard and difficult times." Or, "I knew when I chose you to prepare for spiritual service that you'd have sickness in your family, financial difficulties in your life; I knew that you would have to work hard through this period while others seemed to enjoy the good life. But I chose to have you go through this because it is infinitely more important for you to learn that I AM the LORD who heals you, than that you should have a comfortable and carefree existence."

If we are going to serve the LORD, we must demonstrate our loyalty to Him. We must be willing to follow Him wholeheartedly, to praise Him always, and to cry out to Him in our troubles rather than murmur against Him. But mark it well,

the LORD will, from time to time, test our loyalty by adversity.