

Place: Lurgan Baptist 14:2:2006

Reading Exodus 15: 22-27

## FROM EGYPT TO CANAAN

### 8. TURNING BITTERNESS INTO SWEETNESS

Arthur John Gossip was an outstanding Scottish preacher who died in 1954. When he was Pastor of the Beechgrove Church in Aberdeen Scotland, his wife died. The year was 1927. On the first Sunday after he had buried his wife, Dr. Gossip preached in his church as usual. And the message he brought that morning was entitled “ *But when life tumbles in, what then ?* ” It was probably the best message he had ever preached. Sustained by his strong faith, the lonely, heartbroken pastor told his people, “ *I don't think you need to be afraid of life. Our hearts are very frail, and there are places where the road is very steep and lonely. But we have a wonderful God.* ” Arthur Gossip had come to Marah and he had turned bitterness into sweetness.

Sooner or later each of us will come to Marah. As an old Arabic proverb puts it, “ *sooner or later the black camel kneels in front of every tent.* ” When life's bitter experiences overtake us, and we are forced to walk that lonely road, what shall we do and how shall we respond ? Well, look at Israel. They had been delivered from bondage by the blood of the lamb. They had witnessed God's mighty acts at the Red sea. They were jubilant and dancing after Gods wonderful triumph over Egypt. But what comes next ? To put the question in terms of the Christian life, what comes after saving faith ? Once a sinner has turned to Christ for salvation, what happens next ? *The answer is sanctification ... the long, hard difficult, process of being conformed to the holiness of God.* The Israelites made a decisive break with sin when they left Egypt, but a great deal of sanctification still needed to take place. This process began almost as soon as the music stopped. As the last chords of Miriam's song died away, “ *so Moses brought Israel from the Red Sea, and they went out into the wilderness of Shur.* ” ( 15:22 )

Now they may well have expected to head straight for Canaan, going from grace to glory. Instead their triumph was followed by tribulation, for the Promised Land could only be reached by the way of the wilderness. Now going through the wilderness was not necessary for Israel's salvation, but it was necessary for their sanctification. As John Mackay comments, “ *it is God's normal way of working that entering into glory does not immediately follow salvation. Rather there is a time of preparation to make His people ready for the inheritance that He will bestow on them. That was the method He followed in the case of the Israelites.* ” My .... is this not where we are ? We are now living in the wilderness between the first and second advents of Jesus Christ. He came once to save us, He will come again to take us home. But in the meantime we are on a long and difficult pilgrimage, which the Lord is using to make us holy. This does not mean that our salvation is not secure, it is secure, and the Lord will bring us to our journey's end. But the way is still hard. We will face disappointment, and difficulty, discouragement and doubt. For do you see Israel now ? Moses leads them into the wilderness. Then came three days of testing for

they were without water. ( 15:22 ) Then they saw it .... water... ran to drink only to find it bitter and undrinkable. ***In a moment they descended from the heights of joy to the valley of sorrow.*** But they soon discovered that their God can turn bitterness into sweetness. That's the message of these wonderful verses, the Lord is able to take the bitter experiences of life and fill them with his glorious heavenly sweetness. ***How does God do it ?*** Well look at this passage and notice,

### (1) A PROVING WE MUST ANTICIPATE

Look if you will at ( 15:23 ) “ *And when .....*,” ( 15:23 ) Now we should not assume that the children of Israel came upon this situation by chance. It is evident that the people, two and half million of them probably were actually following Moses who in turn, was moving with the pillar of cloud and fire. In other words, this bitterness lay right in the path of Gods leading, direction and guidance. Believers often ignore the fact that God in his overruling providence allows his people to go through periods of testing. Marah represents everything of a bitter nature and we must accept the fact that Marah experiences of bitterness come to us all. They are

#### (a) ***CERTAIN:***

“ *And when they came to Marah,*” The book of Proverbs tells us “ *that every heart knoweth his own bitterness.*” ( Prov 14:10 ) The troubles of this world come to us all. Pain, sickness, bereavement, disappointment, and then there are troubles that are peculiar to the child of God. To say as some do, that if you come to Christ all your troubles will be over is saying something that is contrary to Scripture. The Lord Jesus said “ *In the world ye shall have tribulation.*” ( John 16:33 ) Peter said “ *think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you as though some strange happened unto you.*” ( 1 Pet 4:12 ) Perhaps you are not at Marah now, in the place of bitterness, experiencing trial and sorrow but you may well be there next week for every true Christian is tried and tested by the Lord for a wise and beneficent purpose. ( Heb 12:6 ) These Marah experiences of bitterness are (a) but they are,

#### (b) ***PURPOSEFUL:***

Did it just happen that as Israel travelled on they ran into the unfortunate experience of bitter waters ? Or did God allow this to happen because he had some purpose in it ? The Lord did allow this to happen for we read in the Psalms that “ *He led them forth by the right way.*” ( Ps 107:7 ) Indeed God led them to Marah by the pillar of cloud and fire. ( 13:22 ) This was therefore part of his plan for his people for as ( 15:25 ) says “ *there he proved them.*” My .... it is the Lords plan to bring us through the trials and testing's of this wilderness journey in order to show to us, (1) The Depravity of our hearts (2) The Sufficiency of our God. ( 2 Cor 3:5 ) For this wilderness experience shows to us ourselves in all our weakness and our God in all his faithfulness. Do you recall what God says in ( Deut 8:2 ) ? You see, the Lord does not send trials to distress us rather he sends them and permits them in order to prove us, humble us to see whether we really love him and are determined at all costs to obey him. Thankfully, the Lord not

only leads us to Marah but he leads us through the Marah experiences to Elim ( 15:27) So these Marah experiences are, (a) (b)

(c) **VARIED:**

For the children of Israel not only experienced bitter waters but they experienced no water. ( 15:22 ) They experienced no bread. They experienced the “ *attacks of their enemies.* ” ( 17:8 ) And all kinds of trials and afflictions. And what a variety of trials crosses your path and mine. Sometimes our Marah experiences are found at home, at work, in the world. It may be bereavement, failing health, decreasing strength, broken relationships, declining business, for there is a variety of trials that we face. Here then is (1) We cannot escape God’s testing we should not try to do so because if God is doing something in our lives we should be able to say “ *Lord go on with what you are doing.* ” (1)

(2) **A PERIL WE MUST AVOID**

What is that ? Murmuring ! You see, when the Israelites came to Marah and found the waters bitter they reacted in a most unfortunate way. Look if you will at ( 15:24 ) Now Moses was the leader commissioned by God to take his people to the promised land. He was doing exactly what God had directed him to do, march with the people and follow the cloud but they murmured against him. Gods people today are no different they still murmur against Gods servants. Moses had guided the people to this very point and what had happened ? There was no water, then the waters of Marah were bitter.

While contending with the many problems of geography and climate in the building of the Panama Canal, Colonel George Goethal’s had to endure the carping criticisms of countless busybodies back home who predicted that he would never complete his great task. But the resolute builder pressed steadily forward in his work and said nothing. “ *Aren’t you going to answer your critics ?* ” a subordinate inquired. “ *In time,* ” Goethals replied. “ *How ?* ” The great engineer smiled  
“ *With the canal,* ” he replied. Well, could Moses, the leader of Gods people have said to his subordinates “ *I’ll answer my critics in time .... with the conquest of Canaan. No problem that lies between us and that goal is too great for God to handle.* ” When we take our eyes off the Lord during periods of testing inevitably we begin to blame other people. In reality the children of Israel were murmuring against the Lord himself.” Its a fatal tendency of our fallen human nature to grumble and complain. C. H. Spurgeon says the word “ *murmur,* ” is made up of two infantile sounds mur-mur. So when we murmur instead of trusting God we are becoming babies again. Or as F.B. Meyer says “ *we turn from being minstrels to becoming mutineers.* ” One moment Israel were singing and dancing the next they were murmuring against the Lord.

Paul preaching at Athens says concerning them that “ *For forty years God suffered their manners.* ” ( Acts 13:18 ) The Lord endured their conduct for forty years ! How long has God suffered your manners and mine ? Are we ill mannered children ? How do we react in the time of testing ? When we come to Marah do we murmur against the Lord ? Against Him “ *who worketh*

*all things after the counsel of His own will.”*

( Eph 1:11 ) In his autobiography Joseph Parker tells of a terrible blow which came into his life when his wife was suddenly taken from him after 34 years of married bliss. He says “ *on January 26<sup>th</sup> 1899 I entered upon my old age for at 9.30.pm that evening the life of my life the heart of heart ascended to the right hand of God. After 34 years of singing Marah.* ” Then Dr. Parker went on to say “ *In that dark hour I became almost an atheist. How could I be otherwise my chief joy had been taken from me. Oh, Gethsemane of darkness.* ” Thankfully the murmuring passed and Joseph Parker was led from Marah to Elim and became a transformed man with a new ministry and a new message. A peril we are to avoid ! **Murmuring** ! Now look at,

**(a) *The REGULARITY of this Murmuring:***

For time and again Israel murmured against the Lord and against His servant Moses.

*1. God's people murmured against THIRST:*

Here they were in the desert ( 15:22 ) without water, and when they found it, it was brackish, and they had to spit it out. It was more than simply distasteful, it was unfit for human consumption.

*2. God's people murmured against NO FOOD:*

( 16:3 ) Did you know what happened when they got food ?

*3. God's people murmured against the FOOD GOD GAVE THEM:*

Their cry was “ *we remember the fish, which we did eat in Egypt freely, the cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlic, but now our soul is dried away, there is nothing at all, beside this manna before our eyes.* ” ( Num 21:5-6 ) They got tired of this unchanging diet.

*4. God's people murmured against the LEADER God set over them:*

For here at Marah, the people murmured against Moses. Do you recall that Miriam and Aaron rose up against Moses, challenging his leadership, questioning his authority as the spokesman of the Lord ? ( Num 12:2 )

My .... what a murmuring lot they were. Has anything changed ? What a murmuring lot we are ! We could go on.

*5. God's people murmured against THE LAND God promised them:*

For when they came back from spying out the land, the majority said, “ *the land through which we have gone to search it, is a land that eateth up the inhabitants thereof.* ” ( Num 13:32, 14:3 )

*6. God's people murmured against God's RIGHTEOUS VERDICTS pronounced on them:*

What was the Lord's righteous verdict ? Just this !

*" Your carcasses shall fall in this wilderness, "* What was the people's response ? *" we .... will go up unto the place which the Lord hath promised. "* ( Num 14:40 )

Finally,

### 7. God's people murmured against God's APPOINTMENTS:

For Korah instigated an organised opposition to the authority of Moses and Aaron. ( Num 16:1-2 ) You see, we need to be very careful how we deal with the servants of God, and the leadership that the Lord has placed over us, for God could deal with us in governmental judgement. ( 1 Sam 24:6 ) Do you see how regular they were in their murmuring ? Time and again they were marked by this complaining spirit. Now remember what happened to Israel is an example to us for Paul says, *" Neither murmur ye as some of them also murmured and were destroyed. "* ( 1 Cor 10:10 ) Its not a sin for us to bring to God our problems, what is a sin is to have a complaining spirit that poisons our fellowship with Christ, and robs us of the joy of serving the Lord.

Do you know what Paul says *" Do all thing without murmurings and disputing. "* ( Phil 2:14 ) A man known for his constant complaining, inherited a large sum of money. When he got it, he complained about how it was not as much as he thought it should be. He bought a farm and asked his wife, what she thought they would name it. She replied, *" Why don't you call it Belly Acres. "* My .... are you a belly acher ? Always murmuring about something ! (a) But notice,

#### **(b) THE REASON for this Murmuring:**

Why did Israel murmur at Marah ? Because their eye was no longer on the Lord. They were forgetful of God. Do you know how the psalmist put it ? *" Our fathers understood not Thy wonders in Egypt, they remembered not the multitude of Thy mercies, but provoked Him at the sea, even the Red Sea. "* ( Ps 106:7 ) After the display of God's power in Egypt, their glorious deliverance at the Red Sea, it ought to have been unmistakably clear to them that God was *" for them, "* and that He was *" with them. "* ( 13:21 ) yet they speak as if they had to do with Moses only. In that situation that you find so difficult, have you taken your eyes off God ? Do we not need afresh to tune our ears to the Word of God, to focus our eyes on the Christ of God, and to rest our hearts on the Sufficiency of God ?

My .... how do you react in the time of testing ? How should we react ? Well notice,

### **(3) A PROCEDURE WE MUST ADOPT**

What is the procedure we must adopt to get the victory over the temptation to murmur ? ( 15:25) Moses prayed and that's the secret. Now think of,

#### **(a) The POSSIBILITIES that were open to Moses:**

Moses could have rebuked the people but instead he went into Gods presence and committed the

whole thing to the Lord in prayer. Notice again Moses did not quit. He could have said “ *Lord it is enough.* ” ( 1 Kings 19:4) “ *Lord I cannot carry on with the responsibility of having two million fretting and murmuring people.* ” But he did not. He could have tried to meet this emergency in his own strength, resting on his wisdom. He could have grumbled. He could have turned around and bickered with the Israelites, instead he took their troubles to the Lord in prayer !

***(b) The PRAYER that was offered by Moses:***

Was typical of the man ! For often he cried out to God for help, and when Moses cried out to God, his one little prayer accomplished more than all the murmurings of the Israelites. I wonder is how we react when life’s trials and testings come upon us ? Do our Marah experiences of bitterness drive us to prayer ? ( Ps 107 ) Over and over again in the Scriptures we find this principle operating. Do you recall James words “ *Is any among you afflicted ? Let him pray.* ” ( James 5:13 ) “ *Let him relate his situation of trial and testing at Marah to the Lord Himself.* ”

*(1) This is what HANNAH did:*

She longed for a child “ *and she was in bitterness of soul and prayed unto the Lord and wept sore.* ” ( 1 Sam 1:10) This is the secret of victory.

*(2) This is what ELISHA did:*

One day the Shunamite woman came to him and said “ *My son is dead.* ” ( 2 Kings 4:28 ) What an experience of bitterness this was for this Mother. So what did Elisha do ? “ *He went in therefore and shut the door and prayed unto the Lord.* ”

*(3) This is what HEZEKIAH did:*

Have you ever received a poison pen letter ? Well Hezekiah received this horrible letter from the Assyrians so what did he do ? Did he fume and fret ? No. When he received the letter he went up “ *into the house of the lord and spread it before the Lord.* ” ( Is 37:14 )

*(4) This is what DANIEL did:*

When they wrote a decree saying that no-one was to pray unto the true and living God ( Dan 6:9) What do you think Daniel did ? What would you have done ? Complain, murmur, hold a conference. Daniel “ *went into his house .... kneeled upon his knees three times a day and prayed.* ”

*(5) This is what PAUL and SILAS did:*

In that bitter place in the prison at Philippi “ *they prayed and sang praises unto God.* ” ( Acts 16:25 ) This is the way of victory. We must expect Gods proving but instead of murmuring we must turn to the Lord in prayer. Now when Moses prayed

the Lord showed him a remedy. ( 15:25) Prayer brings revelation. How significant this is. The Lord showed him a tree. God's remedy for bitterness is a tree. You see there is a,

#### **(4) A PANACEA WE MUST APPLY**

A panacea is a universal medicine. A remedy for all ills.

What does this tree symbolise ? The Lord Jesus and His Cross. You see

##### **(a) *THE CHRIST OF THE CROSS CAN SWEETEN OUR BITTER EXPERIENCES:***

In the O.T. Christ is spoken of “ *as the righteous*

*branch.*” ( Jer 23:5 ) Here at Marah the Lord showed Moses a tree which when he had cast into the waters they were made sweet. ( 15:25) Oh, how near to the waters of bitterness was the tree of sweetness found. And how close to the suffering pilgrim is the suffering Son of God. Have ever noticed that when Peter writes his first epistle its keynote being suffering that beside the suffering pilgrim he places the suffering Son.

( 1 Pet 2:20-21 3:17-18 ) My .... we are treading the same desert his dear feet once trod, we are meeting the same trials as he met. Does all of this not bring comfort to our hearts ? ( Heb 4:15-16 ) *Christ's Knowledge of us can turn the Bitterness into Sweetness.* My .... are you at Marah this .... ? Jesus knows, cares, and understands.

*Christ's Presence with us can turn the bitterness into sweetness.* He does not promise exemption from the trial but he does promise His presence with us in the trial. A man from Philadelphia was ordained to the pastoral ministry. It was a remarkable occasion because only four years earlier he had almost dropped out of the church altogether. The man had dedicated his life to serving the Lord.

At the time he was working for the church, attending college, and preparing for the ministry. Then his newborn daughter was diagnosed with muscular dystrophy. As far as the man was concerned, this kind of suffering had never been part of the bargain. The deal was that he would serve God, and the Lord would bless him. When God did not bless him, he was no longer willing to serve. It was not until he turned his bitterness over to the Lord, that he was restored to joy. *You see, what we encounter may be bitter in itself, but however bitter it is, it does not need to make us bitter.* The problem at Marah was not really the water, bitter though it was, but the bitterness in the hearts of God's people. Do you realise that bitterness does not come in the outward circumstance, but in your inward response ? (a)

##### **(b) *THE CROSS OF THE CHRIST CAN SWEETEN OUR BITTER EXPERIENCES***

For this tree not only speaks of Christ but of His Cross concerning which Peter wrote “ *who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree.*” ( 1 Pet 2:24 ) The cross the tree, not only robs death of its sting ( Heb 2:14 ) it robs life of its bitterness. When we bring the principle of the cross to bear upon the sorrows of life we cast the tree into the bitter waters and so make them sweet. How does this work out in practice ? In this way. Are you suffering for righteousness sake ? Are you being falsely accused because of your loyalty to the truth ? Then think of him who “

*was led as a lamb to the slaughter but opened not his mouth.*” ( 1 Pet 2:23 )

Is your heart embittered by cruel slanders and unkind words ? Then go and stand by the Cross and listen to him who was tormented by earth and hell praying for his murderers ? ( Lk 23:43 ) Is your lot in life a sorrowful one ? Then remember that he was the “ *man of sorrows.*” ( Is 53:3 ) If you are embittered because of the trials and afflictions that have befallen you come to the cross and see him suffering pain and anguish and what was the fruit of it all ? Why sweetness indescribable and it will be the same for you if you will apply the remedy. Throw in the tree. Take Christ right into your bitter experiences and he will transform them and he will transform you.

A beautiful incident occurred a few years at a meeting in London. The church was crowded and just under the pulpit was a carriage in which lay a paralysed woman. Before the meeting proper got under way a man led the company in some community hymn singing. One person after another was calling out favourite hymns. Eventually the man stooped over the side of the pulpit and said to the poor paralytic “ *Will you choose a hymn ? What shall it be ?*” With a smile of heavenly sweetness she replied, “ *Count your blessings.*” She had thrown in the tree. For her the waters had been made sweet.

My .... what about you ? Are you at Marah ? Has life tumbled in around you ? Have you yourself become bitter ? Throw in the tree and He will turn your bitterness in to sweetness.

***“ In the cross of Christ I glory,  
Towering o'er the wrecks of time,  
All the light of sacred story,  
Gathers round its head sublime***

***Bane and blessing, pain and pleasure,  
By the Cross are sanctified,  
Peace is there that knows no measure,  
Joys that through all time abide.”***