

Exodus 15:22-27

Bitter Waters Made Sweet

What a difference a day makes. Don't you find it to be so? One day you find the temperature to be so warm that the theory of global warming seems credible. The next day the temperature is so cold that global freezing becomes the rage. What a difference a day makes.

The application of this phenomenon can be made in any number of ways. One day you're on the mountain top – the next day you're in the valley. One day you're promoted – the next day you're fired or the company goes out of business. One day you're a model of health, fitness and vitality – the next day you're bed ridden and scarcely have the strength to move. What a difference a day makes.

The same thing can be said of the Israelites in our text. One day they're slaves in Egypt – the next day they're free. One day they're crossing the Red Sea on dry ground – the next day they're wandering in the wilderness. In the earlier part of chp. 15 we find them singing the song of Moses – praising the Lord, Miriam and the other women joining in with timbrels and dancing. So we read in v. 1 *I will sing unto the LORD, for he hath triumphed gloriously: the horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea. The LORD is my strength and song, and he is become my salvation: he is my God, and I will prepare him an habitation; my father's God, and I will exalt him.*

3 days later praise has degenerated into grumbling - Ex 15:24 *And the people murmured against Moses, saying, What shall we drink?* And so it would seem that murmuring would come to be largely characteristic of the Israelites that were brought out of Egypt. It is, of course, a serious matter – going without water. We cannot survive long without it – but on the other hand – the Lord had wrought many miracles for the children of Israel and had brought them out of Egypt with great power and a stretched out arm. Should their faith have evaporated so quickly?

And if 3 days in the wilderness without water is not bad enough – how much worse do things become when they find water at last only to discover that the water is so bitter that it's undrinkable? Why do these things happen to the people of God? The children of Israel would eventually reach the conclusion that things had become so bad and so hard that slavery in Egypt was easier than walking with the Lord. And there's a sense in which they're right.

In the realm of slavery their day was planned for them. The expectations of their masters were made plain and all they had to do was what they were told to do. There's a mundaneness about slavery that does make life easy. And spiritually speaking it has always been easier to walk by sight rather than by faith. On the other hand, though, slavery to the devil is never easy. His aims are always destructive and his wages are always the wages of death. I know I point out probably every time I make reference to the book of Exodus how short the memories of the Israelites became. They forgot the rigors of slavery. They forgot the weight of their bondage. They forgot that their children were targeted for

destruction. But beside all this – there’s an element to the story we’ve read that can’t be overlooked. Indeed, it’s the key element to the story. In v. 25 we read that when *Moses cried unto the LORD, the LORD shewed him a tree, which when he had cast into the waters, the waters were made sweet*. Bitter waters made sweet – that’s the theme of the passage and I believe that it’s also meant to be the theme of the Christian’s experience. Such a theme should govern our lives and our expectations. And so I’d like to focus on that theme today with this aim:

The Christian Should Expect the Bitter Waters to be Made Sweet

I. Why This Expectation is Needed

This expectation of bitter waters being made sweet arises from the reality of bitter waters. This is tantamount to saying that bitter waters have been and will be something that the Christian must learn to expect and deal with.

There are, to be sure, certain segments of Christianity that would try to deny the reality of bitter waters. They propose that Christians ought to be healthy and Christians ought to be wealthy and Christians should not ever have to experience bumps in the road. These churches may be heretical but they sure are popular. After all such ridiculous promises have great appeal to the flesh. The Bible, however, knows nothing of this style of Christianity. Quite the contrary – the promise of Christ is that *in the world ye shall have tribulation* (Jn. 16:33). And the uniform testimony of Scripture bears out this truth.

It is interesting to note from the passage we’ve read that the children of Israel were led down the path they were following. Moses was leading them according to v. 1. They were not simply drifting aimlessly. Moses was not going one direction and the children of Israel another direction. I think it would be fair to say that they were in the center of God’s will. It was God, therefore, that led them to these bitter waters.

And so can it be said today that it is God Himself that leads His children to bitter waters. Isn’t this the way God led Job? We know from Job 1 that everything that came upon Job was in accordance with God’s will. This was a trial designed by God from start to finish and Job described it as bitter.

- Job 3:20 *Wherefore is light given to him that is in misery, and life unto the bitter [in] soul?*
- Job 13:26 *For thou writest bitter things against me, and makest me to possess the iniquities of my youth.*
- Job 23:2 *Even to day [is] my complaint bitter: my stroke is heavier than my groaning.*

And so we have clear evidence from Scripture that it is God Himself that subjects His people to the bitter waters of life. Sometimes the people of God magnify their bitterness by adding to it themselves. I’m reminded of Naomi in the book of Ruth. Things became tough in the land of promise and so Elimelech takes his family and sets out to find greener pastures. In the course of his search he dies, his sons die, leaving his wife, Naomi, with her

two daughters in law. Upon her return home some years later Naomi says to her neighbors *call me not Naomi, call me Mara; for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, and the LORD hath brought me home again empty.* Here is a perfect example of a family that saw things go from bad to worse because the initial bitter waters sent them searching in the wrong places for something better. And in the process they only magnified their bitterness.

And so the reality of bitter waters confronts the Christian and in the minds of many the question very often is *why?* Why must a Christian have to deal with bitter waters? Why did Job have to suffer what he suffered? Why did the children of Israel have to travel 3 days in the wilderness only to discover waters that were not drinkable?

Or – if I could bring the matter closer to home – why do Christians fail? Why do Christians lose their jobs? Why do Christians endure hardships and spin their wheels, so to speak, and find it difficult, if not impossible to get ahead? Why are Christians smitten with hardship or disease? Shouldn't they be successful if they're following Christ? Shouldn't God honor them if they're endeavoring to honor Him? Why must Job lose everything? Wasn't it God's own testimony that he was upright and that he feared God and eschewed evil?

And the answer is not terribly difficult to figure out once you realize that God's design is to conform you to the image of His Son and that part of that sanctifying process involves being brought into the fellowship of His sufferings being made conformable to His death. The question that arises out of Job that strikes so many as being a great mystery is why did Job suffer? And the simple answer is because Job's Redeemer would one day suffer and Job was being conformed to the image of His Redeemer.

So we're made to face the reality of bitter waters. And I suppose the way the waters become most bitter is when you're reasonably sure that you're following God's leading – you're endeavoring to serve Christ – and yet you still have to face the reality of bitter waters. How bitter are the waters to those who have gone to the mission field and have seen no reward for it but the bitterness of failure, rejection and reproach? How bitter is the water for the church planter who envisioned starting a church that would be true to Christ and would be uncompromising to the gospel of Christ and yet such a church never gets off the ground?

Now our text teaches us not only to face the reality of bitter waters but it teaches us to expect that these waters – bitter though they may be – can nevertheless be sweetened. And we'll see in a moment just how they're sweetened but for now let me emphasize the point that unless you can train yourselves by faith to expect them to be sweetened you'll find yourselves doing what these Israelites did. You'll murmur against the Lord. You'll grumble and you'll complain and you'll conclude that slavery in Egypt was better.

We find the Psalmist doing this very thing in Ps. 73:13,14 *Verily I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hands in innocency. For all the day long have I been plagued, and chastened every morning.* We find Job rightly charged by Elihu of making a

similar complaint. So we read in Job 34:9 *For he hath said, It profiteth a man nothing that he should delight himself with God.*

Unless you learn to expect that the bitter waters will be made sweet then you'll find yourselves gripped by the same kind of spirit – which only aggravates and prolongs and deepens the sense of bitterness. This leads us to our next consideration, then. We are being taught in this passage that we should expect that the bitter waters of our experiences will be sweetened – indeed we need to expect it – the failure to expect it will leave us as continual grumblers before God.

II. How This Expectation is Realized

Our text tells us in v. 25 that *the LORD shewed him a tree, which when he had cast into the waters, the waters were made sweet.* In this statement we find a revelation made to Moses – *the LORD shewed him a tree* and we find a response to that revelation in the words *which...he had cast into the waters.*

The connection is too plain to miss between this tree and the cross of Jesus Christ. Gal. 3:13 *Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed [is] every one that hangeth on a tree. And in 1Pet. 2:24 Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed.*

I think it is worth noting that in our study we're focusing on how bitter waters become sweetened. When it comes to contemplating Christ, however, we need to invert the theme because in the case of Christ it was a matter of sweet waters being made bitter.

Christ, you see, certainly knew the sweetness of heaven. He received the homage that was His due. He enjoyed fellowship with His Father – and all of this in an atmosphere of purity and bliss. This is what Christ gave up when He condescended to come into this world. He exchanged the sweetness of acceptance for the bitterness of rejection. He exchanged the sweetness of submission to God's will for the bitterness of sinners asserting their own wills. He exchanged the sweetness of God's favor for the bitterness of His Father's wrath.

And He did this in order to purchase us to himself. He did this that we might know the bitterness of slavery to sin exchanged for the sweetness of being sons of God. He shed His blood that we might know the bitterness of hell exchanged for the sweetness of heaven – the bitterness of death exchanged for the sweetness of life. The bitterness of condemnation exchanged for the sweetness of justification.

I love the way Christ's death is described by the hymn-writer when he writes: *Death and the curse were in our cup: O Christ, 'twas full for thee! But Thou hast drained the last dark drop, 'Tis empty now for me: That bitter cup, love drank it up; Now blessing's draught for me.*

When God showed us the cross by His Spirit then He showed us the grounds upon which our bitter waters could be sweetened. But it becomes our task, then, to respond to the

revelation the way Moses responded. The Lord showed Moses the tree – and then Moses cast the tree into the waters – i.e. Moses applied the tree to the waters.

This is what we must learn to do with the cross of Christ. We must learn to apply it to every circumstance of life – even the bitter circumstances of life. And how is this to be done? It's done first and foremost by laying hold of the truth that there is therefore now no condemnation to those that are in Christ Jesus. There's no condemnation – because there's already been condemnation. Christ was condemned. And so we're taught by the cross that whatever dealings God is taking with us – those dealings are not coming from God as our judge – but they're coming from God as our Father.

Would you note the difference that God draws between His dealings with Israel and His dealings with Egypt. He says in v. 26 that *If thou wilt hearken to the voice of the LORD thy God, and wilt do that which is right in his sight, and wilt give ear to his statutes, I will put none of these diseases upon thee, which I have brought upon the Egyptians; for I am the LORD that healeth thee.*

To the Egyptians God was judge. He moved upon Pharaoh with His wrath. He brought that nation under condemnation – but not so with the Israelites. They were shielded from judgment. They were delivered from bondage. They became the people of God and the Lord's relation to them was as One that healed them.

It is on the grounds of the cross, then, that we gain the freedom to interpret every dealing of God with us to be a dealing of love. This does not mean that every dealing is pleasant. But it does mean that every dealing comes from God as our loving heavenly Father, and not our judge.

The purpose behind the Israelites coming to these bitter waters is given to us in v. 25. Note at the end of the verse what it says – *And there he proved them.* This is what God is pleased to do with those that belong to Him. He will prove them or He will test them. He would know from them whether or not they believe that He is the Lord their God who loves them with an everlasting love.

This was the whole purpose behind Job's trial. You remember the devil's accusation against Job? He suggested to God that the only reason Job loved God was because Job had so many things. He loved God, in other words because of his possessions. Would Job love God apart from those possessions? The Lord was pleased to test Job in order to see.

But behind the test there was not to be found a God that was angry with Job. There was not to be found a God that was condemning Job. *Ye have heard of the patience of Job* James writes in his epistle (5:11) *and have seen the end of the Lord, that the Lord is very pitiful and of tender mercy.* This has to be the framework in which trials are interpreted.

And how can we interpret our trials in such a framework? You must see the tree that God has shown you. You must be led to Calvary where you see the very dying form of One taking your place – bearing your sin – delivering you from the wrath that was your portion – reconciling you to Himself and purchasing you unto Himself. And then you must apply

the tree to the bitter waters – which means that we interpret every circumstance of life in the light of the cross.

By looking to the cross you can expect that the bitter waters will be sweetened because you can be convinced that God truly is with you and for you and that all things do work together for good, therefore, on account of that old rugged cross. It does become a bitter cup and an impossible cup to drink from when we lose sight of the cross. If you cave in to the temptation of viewing God as your judge rather than your Father – then bitterness will be your portion and eventually a root of bitterness will spring up from within you whereby you become troubled and those around you become defiled (Heb. 12:15).

On the grounds of the cross, then, we can expect that the bitter waters will be sweetened and by applying the cross to the bitter waters we do our part in the process. It remains for us to consider finally:

III. Where This Expectation Leads –

It was after the tree was applied to the bitter waters that the Lord said in v. 26 *If thou wilt diligently hearken to the voice of the LORD thy God, and wilt do that which is right in his sight, and wilt give ear to his commandments, and keep all his statutes, I will put none of these diseases upon thee, which I have brought upon the Egyptians: for I [am] the LORD that healeth thee.*

Whenever I read verses like these – verses that fit the category of *do this and live* a proper understanding of the covenants becomes paramount. It's a matter of some discussion and debate among Reformed theologians as to whether or not the Mosaic covenant represents a restatement of the Covenant of Works. I think the answer is both *yes* and *no*. Yes – in the sense that the promises of the covenant are contingent upon the condition of perfect obedience. That's what the original covenant with Adam amounted to. But the answer would be *no* from the vantage point of God's provision. You see, along with the contingent promises based on perfect obedience there was also provision made for sin. The whole sacrificial system that involved all those animal sacrifices was for sin.

We know, of course, that those sacrifices pointed to Christ. So what's called for is the obedience of faith, or gospel obedience. We also know, however, that the entire Mosaic economy was described by Peter himself before the Jerusalem Council as an unbearable yoke:

And when there had been much disputing, Peter rose up, and said unto them, Men and brethren, ye know how that a good while ago God made choice among us, that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel, and believe. 8 And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us; 9 And put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. 10 Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? (Acts 15:7-10)

It's not hard to understand why that yoke was heavy. There was a strong emphasis on the concept of *Do this and live*. And if the Israelites were honest before God and knew

anything about the character of God and the nature of their own depravity they would know that they came short, they came very short of God's glory even at their best. And that's what they were suppose to feel. That's what the law was for – to make them feel the weight of their sins.

That's exactly what Paul writes to the Galatians who were so tempted to gauge their acceptance with God on their obedience to the law: Ga 3:19 *Wherefore then [serveth] the law?* Paul asks in Gal. 3:19 *It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made...* And a few verses later in v. 24 *Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith.* Paul makes the same point perhaps even more vividly in Rom. 7:13 *Was then that which is good made death unto me? God forbid. But sin, that it might appear sin, working death in me by that which is good; that sin by the commandment might become exceeding sinful.*

The law was never intended to make you see how righteous you are. The law was intended to make you see how sinful you are. And if you fail to see how sinful you are then you're either deficient in your understanding of the character of God, the nature of the law, or your own depravity or all 3.

This is not to say that there's no striving for righteousness – Oh indeed there is and should be. But if you're striving with a right understanding of God and the law and your own depravity then your striving will always be accompanied with deep humility as well as profound gratitude for God's provision of Christ.

Whenever you see such verses as what we find in v. 26 that makes reference to diligent hearkening and perfect obedience your response to such verses should be – *thank God for Christ, my Savior, who came as that second Adam, as my representative who kept for me all that the Mosaic economy demanded.* He alone diligently hearkened and He alone rendered that obedience to all His commandments and precepts. And then He alone also paid the price for my failures to measure up and for my transgressions. I will strive, because I can strive without the dread of falling short of His glory and without the dread of condemnation.

And as I strive to understand the character of God and the nature of the law and see more and more that my own righteousness is as filthy rags before God then I will allow that law to do what it's suppose to do which is to drive me back to that tree – that tree of Christ, that tree that can even sweeten the bitter waters of my own incomplete and defective obedience. This is where the expectation of bitter waters being made sweet should take us.

But this expectation also leads us somewhere else. Isn't it interesting to note that in the last verse of the chapter – v. 27 we're told that the Israelites came to *Elim, where were twelve wells of water, and three-score and ten palm trees; and they encamped there by the waters.*

Here was a place of rest at last. Here was a desert oasis and a place of refreshment. And from this encampment we are able to draw the lesson that when the bitter waters are sweetened – or when we learn to apply the cross of Christ to every trial and find ourselves

the willing and obedient servants of Christ because of the sweetness of the cross – we enter into our rest. We rest in the finished work of Christ. We cease from striving to gain something from God we could never gain – we are saved from the turmoil that bitterness creates among those that know nothing of the cross and we draw our spiritual refreshment from the wells of salvation.

I wonder today as we bring our meeting to a close – do you know the blessed truth of having the bitter waters sweetened? I have no doubt that you know the reality of the bitter waters. I don't know of anyone who is exempt from Marah. But have you learned to apply the cross of Christ to the bitter waters of life so that those waters become sweetened to you? If the bitter waters have been sweetened then the response of your heart will be to follow on to know the Lord in the pathway of gospel obedience.

And if those waters have been sweetened then you'll also arrive at Elim – the place of rest and refreshment. I trust this day that the Lord will help you to learn all you can of the cross of Christ so that you may be enabled to make Christ's atoning death the lens through which you view every circumstance of life. It is the cross that will make the bitter waters sweet. May God so prove it to you by leading you to the cross.