

The Bitter Taste of Sanctification

Exodus 15:22-27

Covenant Waterfall, 21 April 2024

Introduction

We South Africans tend to love to complain. Especially around a braai – complain about the government, loadshedding, terrible drivers on the roads, lament at how our country has degenerated, hark back to better times. I'm guilty of this, I think most of us are. One thing to voice the reality around us, another to get utterly consumed by it, bitter and twisted about it – makes us even more frustrated and really solves nothing.

In our passage this morning we see that after three days of wandering in the parched wilderness, God leads the Israelites to a spring with bitter waters. There, instead of trusting in God's faithfulness and goodness, the Israelites moan and complain. What we will see here is that God leads us to bitter waters in order to sanctify us.

- Bitter waters, bitter hearts
- The Tree of life
- Do this and live
- God's abundant provision

A. Bitter waters, bitter hearts, vv.22-24

Remember from last week we saw how Moses and all the people of Israel singing praises to God in joyful celebration and thanksgiving for how he had just saved them. They had just witnessed him miraculously part the Red Sea, leading them through it, destroying Pharaoh and the host of Egypt. Now they were free from bondage, God had delivered them from their enemy and set them free and they believed in him.

Our passage picks up in verse 22, **“Then Moses made Israel set out from the Red Sea, and they went into the wilderness of Shur. They went three days in the wilderness and found no water.”**

Fresh from singing to, celebrating and worshipping God for his great salvation, the Israelites leave the shores of the Red Sea, jubilant in their newfound freedom. Perhaps they thought that they’d now live happily ever after. But as they’re about to find out very quickly, the real journey is only beginning. From the Red Sea, the Lord continues to lead the Israelites by the pillar of cloud and fire into the wilderness of Shur – in the Sinai Peninsula.

If you’ve ever been to the Kalahari or the Namib desert, you’ll have some idea of what the wilderness is like in Sinai. It’s bone dry, barren and desolate. Water is extremely scarce. We all know how necessary water is for survival. This hits home to us every time we experience a water cut here in Waterfall. Huge inconvenience, realise just how essential water is!

Now the Israelites had been travelling for three days on foot, that’s about 60 km or so. They’re walking through scorching desert heat (40-50 degrees Celsius) during the day. And the text tells us that **“they found no water.”** To not have water after a few hours in those conditions would be extremely challenging. After some days without water, there would have been many of them experiencing severe dehydration and some of the more vulnerable possibly close to death.

Finally they arrive at a spring. Imagine their delight and relief at them spotting the lush trees and glistening water from a distance. Rush to the water, plunge in their faces, take a big gulp to finally quench their thirst... only to spit it out in revulsion. Verse 23 **“–When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter; therefore it was named Marah.”** The high mineral content in the water rendered it brackish – undrinkable! You can just imagine the deep disappointment. That disappointment quickly turns to them bitterly grumbling – verse 24: **“And the people grumbled against Moses, saying, “What shall we drink?”**

Let’s pause here and take a step back and see what’s going on. We’ve seen from previous weeks that the Exodus is a pattern of salvation, a picture of the gospel. By God opening up the Red Sea, he saved the Israelites – it was their baptism – they were brought from death to life, from slavery to freedom. Then putting their faith in God their Saviour, they

worshipped him in song. Yet they did not set foot in the Promised Land immediately after they crossed the Red Sea. Instead, we see here that God leads them into the wilderness. Why? While they're out of Egypt, Egypt is still in their hearts. While they're saved, God now needs to sanctify them. He needs to train them out of their sinful ways, discipline them – disciple them and get their hearts right before they enter the Promised Land. How is he going to achieve this? By leading them through the harsh Sinai wilderness for the next 40 years!

Already, just three days into the journey we see their sinful hearts exposed – we see their immaturity and lack of faith on display. They've just witnessed God perform mighty signs and wonders to save them. He miraculously provided for them in incredible ways. He's promised to be with them and get them to the Promised Land. But here we see that the moment things don't go their way, no water, bitter water, they forget God's goodness and start complaining and bickering.

Let's not lose sight of the fact here that it was God himself who led them into the wilderness and led them to Marah, the bitter waters, by his presence in the pillar of fire and cloud. Why would God do this? Why would he intentionally lead his people into hardships and despair? Isn't God good? Doesn't he always give us good gifts? He certainly is good, but his way of working good in our lives doesn't always match up with how we think that should be. The reason God led the Israelites to bitter waters was to expose their bitter hearts. Instead of trusting in him, instead of praying to him, they grumbled and complained. Their sinful hearts were exposed here and this is exactly what God need to work on them, to sanctify them through this.

What is our response when the Lord leads us to bitter waters? How do we react when he permits hard times in our lives? Do we kick and scream, get embittered and angry with God and our circumstances? There's always a reason why the Lord leads us into suffering. It's not to punish us, but, like with the Israelites, it's to do some heart surgery on us – to sanctify us, to lead us to trust him more, to be prayerfully reliant on him, that we may know that indeed he is faithful and good.

B. The Tree of Life, v.25a

While the people of Israel “**grumbled against Moses**” (v.24), Moses does what the people should have done. And what was that? Pray! Verse 25, “**And he cried to the Lord...**” Moses didn’t grumble about the fact that he couldn’t drink the water, or that the people were mad at him. Instead he prayed to God. He realised that there was nothing he could do that would quench the thirst of the Israelites. His only option was to rely upon the Lord himself. When we bring things to the Lord in prayer, it’s evidence of our dependence upon him. We are trusting him to do only what he can do.

What then was the result of Moses’ prayer, his cry to the Lord? Verse 25 continues, “**and the Lord showed him a log, and he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet.**” God answered Moses’ prayer. Moses’ prayer accomplished so much more than the grumbings of Israel! God showed Moses a log. The Hebrew word can also be translated as “tree”. Moses then threw in this piece of tree into the water and God miraculously healed the water, making it sweet and ready to drink for the parched Israelites.

There is a theme in Scripture of trees that heal and bring life. In Genesis 2:9, the tree of life was in the midst of the Garden of Eden, pointing to the promise of eternal life. This same tree is present in the new creation, in Revelation 22:2, where it says that the tree bears fruit every month and its leaves are for the healing of the nations. Here in Exodus 15, God uses a tree to bring healing to sick waters and thereby providing life to his thirsty people.

How gracious and merciful is God through all this? In the face of his people grumbling and complaining, he nevertheless provides for them. He teaches them, as a part of their sanctification, to trust him and know that he will indeed take care of all their needs. Same with us – a sign of our growth as Christians is that we trust God to provide even when it’s really difficult to see exactly how he will.

C. Do this and live, vv.25b-26

Verses 25b and 26 continue...

“There the Lord made for them a statute and a rule, and there he tested them, ²⁶ saying, “If you will diligently listen to the voice of the Lord your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give ear to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I

will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians, for I am the Lord, your healer.”

Having graciously provided sweet waters for the Israelites, God proceeds to “test” them. Hebrew word can also mean “train” or “exercise”. Nature of this training? Training in order to be obedient to God’s law. The Israelites are to “**diligently listen to the voice of God**” and do what is right in his eyes, keeping his laws.

Important to understand that Israel has already been saved by God – they’ve been saved by grace – his sovereign work of opening up the Red Sea and redeeming them with his mighty hand and outstretched arm. Now that God has saved them, they are not to just live as they please. Not to continue to live how they were used to living in Egypt. No, now as God’s chosen people, they are to live according to his laws and his ways. They haven’t been saved by their good works, but now their good works will be evidence that they have been genuinely saved. They are to put to death their old sinful ways and follow God’s commands. This is the heart of sanctification. WSC Q&A 35:

A. Sanctification is the work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.

God promises the Israelites blessings for obedience. If they keep his commands, he will not curse them with diseases as he did the Egyptians. Instead, he will bless them and heal them.

We are not saved by our good works, none of our good works contribute anything to our salvation, as we are saved by God’s gift of grace to us through Christ. But this does not mean good works and obedience to God’s law are not important. There is great blessing promised to us if we are diligent in our obedience to the Lord. How so? We are spared from the destructive effects of the folly of our own sin. And instead we get to enjoy the blessings of living according to God’s will for us. Psalm 1:1-3:

“Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; ² but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night... In all that he does, he prospers.”

D. God's abundant provision, v.27

Verse 27 concludes, **“Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees, and they encamped there by the water.”**

Once they have drunk their fill at Marah, the Lord continues to lead them in the wilderness until they come to an oasis in the desert called Elim. Hebrew = “eyl'im” = sounds like the Hebrew word for “trees”. Good reason for that name – as there the Israelites find an abundance of trees – 70 palm trees to be precise and 12 springs of fresh, sweet water.

Not only has God miraculously turned the bitter waters of Marah sweet, but now he has abundantly provided the Israelites a rich oasis, a paradise of fresh water and sweet fruit (dates). Not just one palm tree and one spring, but enough springs for each of the 12 tribes of Israel, and enough trees for each of the 70 elders of Israel. God has surely blessed them with more than enough, a super abundance!

How often we doubt God's goodness and faithfulness to provide and sustain us? Our God is faithful, brothers and sisters. Jesus' words to us in Matthew 6:31-33:

“Do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ³² For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. ³³ But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”

Conclusion

Like we've seen with the Israelites, it's easy to grumble and complain about our circumstances, and when things don't work out the way we'd hoped. But when this grumbling and complaining turns to bitterness and anger, when we fail to bring our needs before God in prayer, this betrays a lack of faith and hardness of heart. It reveals that we are trusting not in God, but in idols: in ourselves, in other people, in the state of the economy, in our government, in our jobs, in money. Reality is that all those things will let you down at some point. None of them can truly satisfy. Putting all your trust in them will ultimately lead to death and destruction, if not in this life, certainly for eternity.

Hope? There is only One who is completely trustworthy, who truly satisfies and turns our bitterness into sweetness. Like Israel, we are prone to wander and break God's law. But Jesus is completely trustworthy, the only Righteous One, because he is the only one who has completely obeyed God's law. Because of his obedience, if you trust in him, God counts his perfect righteousness to you (Rom 5:19).

Like Israel, we try and find satisfaction in idols and complain when they don't deliver. Jesus is the only one who truly satisfies, as within him are found sweet living waters. He promises us in John 4:14 that if we drink of his waters, we'll never be thirsty again.

This Jesus also died an accursed death on a tree, bearing upon himself the curse for sins we deserve, so that our bitterness of heart may be turned to sweetness and we may receive the forgiveness of sins and true life.

Trust in Jesus, the Living Waters, the only Righteous One who counts his perfect righteousness to you by faith, who removes your sins as far as the east is from the west, who bears the curse we ought to bear. Know that only he truly satisfies your thirst, only he removes the bitterness of your sins and continues to work sanctification in your life. He alone will sustain you through the wilderness, through the valley of the shadow of death by his living waters, and bring you safely to Canaan's side, to the heavenly Zion, the true Promised Land, where we will dwell with him and he will be our God.

Amen.