

## Wilderness Gleanings 1: Marah

**Exodus 15:17:** “And Miriam answered them, Sing ye to the LORD, for he hath triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea. So Moses brought Israel from the Red sea, and they went out into the wilderness of Shur; and they went three days in the wilderness, and **found no water**. And when they came to **Marah**, they could not drink of the waters of Marah, for they were **bitter**: therefore the name of it was called Marah. And the people murmured against Moses, saying, what shall we drink? And he cried unto the LORD; and the LORD shewed him a tree, which when he had cast into the waters, the waters were made sweet: there he made for them a statute and an ordinance, and there he proved them, And it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God led them not through the way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near; for God said, Lest peradventure the people repent when they see war, and they return to Egypt.”

After their emancipation from Egypt and three days in the wilderness of Shur, the people arrive at Marah, the place of bitter water for their first wilderness stop. The flesh now comes to the fore in their murmurings against Moses and even against God, for Moses was God’s servant. New provisions of grace are now brought into view which have a marked correspondence for us today.

We recall the time of joy and relief of the lifted burden and bondage when we were first saved. It is not long however before we are tested. We discover that the world is a wilderness waste and wild and come to the point where, especially as a young believer we encounter the bitter waters of **separation**. Old friendships are divorced; past associations become distant and worldly amusements distasteful. Walking in the world becomes a bitter experience.

How do we respond? The flesh often rises and causes us to murmur and pine that we have to forsake much. In fact, the world will readily inform the flesh employing all its guile and glory that we are a deprived people – we “can’t do this or that;” can’t go here or there.” Such was the bitterness experience of the newly redeemed Hebrews, aggravated by the mixed multitude within – those of other nations who worshipped other gods. But there was help at hand – divine help to subdue the flesh, overcome the bitterness and restore the joy of redemption.

Moses cried unto the LORD, “and the LORD shewed him a tree, which when he had cast into the waters, the waters were made sweet.” The bitter waters were made sweet bringing before us the priestly ministry of Christ. There is a Man, who knew what it was to walk in the world in perfection; who encountered the bitterness of separation, rejection and humiliation. It is our Lord, our Great High Priest. This is His ministry in regard to our **spiritual infirmities** – not our sins!<sup>1</sup> “For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin [sin apart]” (Heb 4:15). And so the redeemed are exhorted to “come boldly unto the throne of grace that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb 4:15).

The Lord’s priestly ministry is exclusively to the redeemed and it is available at the moment of redemption. The bitter waters of the wilderness are sweetened by His sympathetic high priestly ministry. We don’t go before Him; He is there before God on our behalf. The *parted* waters of the Red sea revealed what was in the heart of a loving God – *redemption*. The *bitter* waters of Marah revealed what still resides in the heart of redeemed man - *rebellion*. The *sweetened* waters of Marah revealed the merciful heart of God to redeemed man – *restoration*. He restoreth my soul and leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake.

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<sup>1</sup> God never tempts man with sin because He is Holy. What we have here is a spiritual trial. “Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man” (James 1:13).

The lesson at Marah is Christ as our Great High Priest going before and meeting our need due to the bitterness of *separation*; at Gilgal (which we will come to later) it is something altogether different – our putting on the “whole armour of God” to withstand the conflict in pursuit of our heavenly *possession*.

*“Eden’s excuse!”*

There is another important lesson here. It is murmuring - apportioning blame to others rather than exercising self-judgment. In an act of base ingratitude “the people murmured against Moses, saying, “What shall we drink?” How soon had they forgotten the power and glory of God displayed in their redemption!

Such is the wretched nature of the flesh, as another has noted: “Ten thousand mercies are forgotten in the presence of a single trifling privation.” Their reproach of Moses also had the potential to undermine faith in the God who anointed him. For this cause God vindicates Moses and affirms His providence and mercy, in the furnishing of the tree *and* in the provisions made at Elim.<sup>2</sup> How easy it is for a destructive murmuring spirit to enter the heart and then into the local assembly, causing strife and unrest. “Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer” (1 Cor 10:10). “For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure. Do all things without murmurings and disputing” (Phillip 2:13-14).

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<sup>2</sup> “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” (Ex 15:26). This is not “the Law” which was yet to be given. It simply presents what has *always* been true – man’s moral responsibility to obey God and, that he will be blessed in doing so!