

The waters of Marah

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[0 : 00] And chapter 15, and we read again there, verses 23 and 24. When they came to Mara, they could not drink its water because it was bitter.

That is why the place is called Mara, meaning bitter. So the people grumbled against Moses saying, what are we to drink? What a come down from the previous part of this chapter which we studied last week.

Remember, in the earlier part of this chapter, we have the song of Moses celebrating God's mighty triumph in the deliverance of his people from the awesome might of the king of Egypt and his army.

The children of Israel had passed through the Red Sea and fruit, as on dry land, while Pharaoh and his armies were destroyed in the sea. It was a song of triumph, of joy, celebrating God's mighty triumph.

And now, we move in the second part of this chapter, from triumph to testing. And it's often the same for us in our Christian lives. We may go through some great experience, perhaps of deliverance, a time of blessing, a time of peace, a time of prosperity.

[1 : 15] And then before we know it, we're faced with a great triumph, something we didn't expect. And the scripture leads us to believe that this is God's way, quite often, of dealing with his people.

Not, of course, to destroy them, to prove and test them, and indeed to drive them to a greater and more living faith in himself. After triumph, the testing.

How soon the song of praise turned into the grumbling of discontent. How human were these Israelites? We can recognize them in ourselves, can't we, so often. So let's look, first of all, at this incident at Mara, and then later on at the beginning of God's provision of the manna.

We move from studying the incident at Mara, to the giving of the manna, from bitterness, we may say, to blessing. Now God tested the Israelites at the very basic level of their human need.

He tested them at a very basic level. It wasn't in any great theological way. He tested them at a very basic level of human need, at the level of hunger and thirst, the need for water and for bread.

[2 : 31] Let's see then how he did it. Notice in verse 22 that Moses led Israel. They weren't wandering meaninglessly or without any purpose. God obviously had revealed to Moses that they were to go and worship him at Mount Sinai.

And so Moses led the children of Israel down the west side of the Sinai Peninsula, some distance from the Red Sea, along the route of the various oases that were found there.

It's very possible that Moses had some prior knowledge of this area. In any case, we can be sure that God was leading him. It was by direct revelation and, of course, by the fiery, cloudy pillar, which led them all their journey through.

Moses led them. And he led them from the Red Sea into the first area, which is called the desert, or the wilderness perhaps is better, or sure. We're not to think of the desert here as being completely sandy without any growth or vegetation.

It's probably better to hold the translation wilderness, as the authorised person has it. The wilderness in the sense of an uncultivated place, perhaps with growth, when there was rain, and, of course, dotted by these oases where the springs would produce water.

[3 : 48] They travelled for three days, and, of course, the water that they had brought with them had now run out, and they were looking for a source of water. Imagine their joy when they came to a place where there was obviously some kind of spring.

Imagine their disappointment when it turned out to be water which was hardly drinkable, probably because of a lot of mineral salt. It was bitter. Because of that, it was either already called Marah, or it was later called Marah, meaning bitter.

And the first reaction of the people was, of course, grumbling. Came to Moses and said, Well, what will we drink? You brought us here. You're our leader after all. It's up to you to provide for our needs.

What on earth are we to drink? This stuff, we just can't touch it. What is Moses' reaction? He cried to the Lord. He did what the Israelites should have done at the beginning.

He cried to the Lord. Moses knew that, humanly speaking, he had no answer. He had done his best. He had brought them. He had followed God's leading. He had brought them to this oasis, the first one on their way down and it's through the Sinai Peninsula.

[4 : 56] And they came to a place where the water was unbrinkable. What is his reaction? Did he start grumbling? No. He was a man of faith. And so he brought the matter to the Lord, cried out to the Lord, and the Lord answered him.

And the Lord showed him a piece of wood that could also be translated tree, as it is in the authorized version, showed him a tree, perhaps a bush or something. And he threw it into the water. And the water became sweet.

Now that may indeed be a complete miracle in the sense that God used some supernatural means, but it may of course have been the use of some aromatic wood which gave a different taste to the water to overcome the bitter taste.

It's not clear from Scripture. In any case, it was the Lord's leading. It was the Lord's provision for this particular predicament in which the people were. The Lord showed Moses what to do. Moses obeyed.

The water became sweet. And the people had water sufficient to drink. God tested them. And of course they failed the first test.

[6 : 03] Instead of coming to Moses and saying, well, let's go to the Lord and find out what his solution is, they grumbled. That was their first reaction. And as we see later on, grumbling against Moses was tantamount to grumbling against God because Moses was their leader appointed by God himself.

And God made it clear at that very moment in this second part of verse 25 that this was indeed a test. The Lord made a decree and a law for them and there he tested them.

He said, if you listen carefully to the voice of the Lord, who God and do it is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the Lord who heals you.

The Lord made it clear there that their trip, their wanderings through the wilderness was to be a time of testing. It was to lead them to a greater dependence upon him, to a more living faith in him, and he was going to deliver them his commands and his decrees, which would test their obedience.

If they kept his commands and decrees, then he would bless them. And he would not bring on them the diseases that he had brought on the Egyptians. Now, whether we are to understand by that that he would protect them from all kinds of diseases is not clear, but certainly it is a promise and undertaking a commitment by God not to send the plagues that he had sent upon the Egyptians.

[7 : 45] And he said, I am the Lord, you healer. I am the Lord who heals you. In the same way that he was able to reveal to Moses the way to heal the water, to make that water drinkable, palatable, and health-giving, so he was the Lord who was able to heal their diseases.

Literally, yes, and spiritually also. Again and again, God reveals himself in this way. I am the Lord who does something. I am the Lord who leads you.

I am the God who feeds you. I am the Lord who protects you. I am the Lord who heals you. You see how God deals with his people in this personal way.

This is his way of dealing with his covenant people, of committing himself to them to meet their needs. At this point, the need was for water. He provided for that need.

And now he undertakes for them that if they will obey his commands and commit themselves to him, he will undertake for them in the matter of healing also.

[8 : 49] He will not afflict them with diseases, but he will protect them from diseases and give them healing. Now there are those who would spiritualize this little incident here and they see in, and this has been an ancient interpretation, way back before the Middle Ages, they see here a mention or a kind of prophecy of the cross about the wood.

I think we cannot say that the cross is definitely meant here in the scripture. We must take this history as it is, as a historical occasion, but it does illustrate for us that if we believe and trust in the God-appointed means of salvation, then we will be saved.

Whether we can say that this piece of wood or this tree actually is meant to speak about the cross, it is difficult to say, but what it does tell us is that God demands obedience from us.

And what is his command? His command is that we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved. To believe in the Lord Jesus Christ crucified for us on the cross.

That is God's command for us. Do we want to know his saving power? Then let us obey his command by believing in his provision. Moses showed that he had faith by doing this.

[10 : 15] Perhaps he had some knowledge of some healing property in the tree. We don't know. On the other hand, it may have seemed quite ridiculous to him. What good would throwing a piece of wood into the spring do?

But he obeyed God's revealed will. That's the main point of the story. He obeyed God's command. And he availed of God's provision for that need.

And God honored that faith and healed the water and thus provided for his people. So it is with you and me. Do we wish God's blessing? Then let us respond to his offer of mercy and grace in the Lord Jesus Christ, believing in him.

And then we will know his healing about the greatest disease of all, that disease of sin. Now immediately after this, they leave that particular oasis and go on to the next one.

And this was a very different one. That I think also speaks to us of our experience. That often our experience is so varied that we may perhaps go through a time of terrible testing.

[11 : 19] And then God gives us another time of peace and of prosperity. He came to Elam. And here there was no problem. Twelve springs, seventy palm trees. Now again, there are those who are trying to spiritualize that and find some significance in the actual figures.

Twelve springs for the twelve tribes, et cetera. And I don't think that's what is spoken of here primarily. What is spoken of is God's abundant provision. Moses had responded in faith at that earlier testing time and now God was showing that he was well able to provide for their needs.

And he gives them this abundant provision of Elam. And that too is often our experience. Come through a time of testing then God gives us some time of prosperity, of calm, of blessing.

And these are wonderful times. Notice, they had to move on from there. They couldn't stay there. They might have said, well, Elam is a wonderful place, let's stay here. But no, they were pressing on towards the promised land and so they had to set out to Elam and they came from a very forbidding place didn't they?

The desert of Sin. Now there, probably the word Sin is related to the word Sinai. So it was obviously a desert or wilderness which stretched between Elam and Sinai.

[12 : 34] And they had to go through that howling wilderness. So let's go on now from that incident of Mara where God provided water for their thirst to the incident in this wilderness where God provided food.

It was now nearly a month since they had left Egypt. You remember, they left on the Passover night, the 15th night of the first month. It was now the 15th day of the second month.

A whole month had gone by. And think of what an eventful month that had been. And now perhaps the supplies they had brought with them, all the flour and all the other food items that they had brought with them were running out.

Now you might wonder, why didn't they start slaughtering all the flocks and animals they had brought with them? Well, it's not as simple as that. Pastoral people who are nomadic people don't like to slaughter their flocks because they are their only source of wealth after all.

And they had milk and wool and all the rest from their animals. And it was a finite resource. They couldn't go on killing their animals forever. And in any case, they had to keep those animals for the sacrifices which they knew would be due when they came to Sinai.

[13 : 52] They needed bread. They needed the staff of life. And they found that it was running out and so in the desert in the wilderness the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron.

See how soon they were turned from their satisfaction at God's provision at Marah and at Edom to dissatisfaction.

And it leads them to think back with longing to the days in Egypt. It's hardly imaginable, isn't it? That they think back to those days of slavery, the harsh slavery.

And to them it was preferable that they would be under that slavery without their freedom and yet have food to eat. Now it's not likely that they had pots of meat every day. But in their imagination it was like that.

They would think back to those days and all the difficulties had sort of been erased from their memory as they compared it with this barren wilderness with its threatening of thirst and hunger.

[14 : 56] If only we were back in Egypt. Things were easier then. Yes, we had to work a bit but at least we had to eat. You brought us out here and the star was to death. Now how human they were and how like us they are too.

It's often a temptation I believe in the Christian life to look back to perhaps the days when perhaps we had not committed our lives to Christ and say, well, wasn't it easier then? We didn't have all these things to do.

We didn't have all these commitments. We were much freer then. We perhaps make an idealized view of our past life whether non-Christian life or perhaps in the early days of our Christian life.

We want to go back but there's no way back. We have to go forward. We have to deal with the situation as we find it and that is what the Israelites had to learn to do.

They could not go back to Egypt. It was unthinkable. They couldn't go back to slavery even if they thought it would mean provision for their needs.

[16 : 01] And there's no way back for us all. So once we commit our lives to Christ we have to go on in faith. And however idealized you might think our former life was it cannot be compared with the joy and the thrill of knowing God and his son Jesus Christ and their provision throughout every need.

But God does send us these times of testing as he sent to this right. How then did God deal with his disobedient and grumbling people on this occasion?

But the Lord said to Moses I will give them bread from heaven. They will know that I am God that I am the Lord. I'll give them bread to eat I'll give them meat to eat.

Bread in the morning and meat in the evening. And I will test them in it also. Notice this note of testing comes in time after time.

I'll test them to see whether they are obedient or not. I'll give them bread every day but on the sixth day they have to gather twice as much because I will not give them the bread on the seventh day.

[17 : 05] The seventh day is to be special. The seventh day is to be a Sabbath. And then the Lord himself appeared in a cloud to the Israelites to impress upon them the seriousness of their grumbling.

Look at verse 10. While Aaron was speaking to the whole Israelite community and telling them what the Lord was going to do for them the Lord himself appeared in his glory. They were not to understand by that if there was any visible form or image but it does mean I believe that that cloud which was there to perhaps a pillar or a column of cloud which was there as their guide that the glory in some way shone out from it perhaps in an awesome way an awesome splendor.

and the people were made to see how wicked how sinful their grumbling was. They were grumbling not just against their leaders they were grumbling against the God who had delivered them who had called them out of Egypt who had delivered them out of Egypt they were grumbling against him.

And now they were going to see God's provision for their daily needs. So this time they had perhaps had sufficient supplies from Egypt that now they were going to step out in faith for their daily wants relying for God to supply them.

Now his provision was in two ways he rained down quail upon them now it's quite possible that this was the time of the quail's migration they used to migrate or perhaps still do from Africa up through the Sinai Peninsula up towards the Mediterranean and it would seem that God caused a particularly heavy migration at this point and it's well known I believe that the quails come so sickly and by this time they're so exhausted that they're quite easily picked up off the ground somebody can run after them and catch them quite easily and God caused it to come just at the right time and in an amazing amount now this I think is different from the incident recorded later I think in numbers where the quails also come and after that there was a disease brought perhaps by the quails themselves or by some insect on the quails but here there was no such thing it was God's provision to show that he could supply even meat the thing that they so dearly desired and which they could no longer have he provided meat for them by raining down quails from heaven but then he gave them something even more mysterious than that he gave them bread from heaven now again some people have tried to find a naturalistic explanation for the manna the bread from heaven because it's well known that in parts of the Sinai Peninsula there are certain trees tamarisk trees and there's a sort of resinous exudate from them which may fall on the ground and look something like manna and there are also insects which secrete a kind of glutinous subject or resinous substance and this also may be something like the manna that is spoken of here but I think we're to understand here something entirely miraculous because it is a year round occurrence not a seasonal thing and it was in such an amazing quantity that it could be nothing else than a completely miraculous and supernatural supply of this material for eating and so it appeared in the morning after the dew had gone up there was found on the ground thin flakes or perhaps some people translate as globules white globules round deposits of this stuff which when it was eaten tasted sweet like wafers made with honey and the people had never seen anything like it before when they saw it they said something like manna or manu what is it that was the translation of the

[20 : 53] Hebrew and that name stuck to it manna what is it and God then Moses said to them it is the bread the Lord has given you to eat this was God's provision for their need and it was to be a daily provision and they were to go out daily for it they were not to keep it for the next day it had to be gathered fresh every day if they kept it until next day it stank and the worms or maggots appeared in it but there was one particular day in which they had to gather more and to keep it until next day that was the sixth day now I think from this we can be almost certain that the sabbath was known to the journey before this we know of course from genesis that the seventh day was to be a day of rest the word sabbath is not used there this is the first instance of the use of the word sabbath but there is no doubt that from creation the weekly day of rest or the weekly sabbath as we now call it was ordained by God and here it was becoming more clear to the Israelites what it meant and indeed it was formalized later on at Sinai you see it's wrong to say that the sabbath was given at Sinai first of all at least it was given here in the desert before they came to

Sinai and indeed it is I believe scriptural to say that it was given from the creation itself but here the Israelites were told that they had to gather twice as much on the sixth day so that on the seventh they could rest and observe the sabbath the day of rest but of course there were those who disobeyed this command also some of them paid no attention and on the morning of the seventh day some people went out to gather and they found none and the Lord said to Moses verse 28 how long will you that means you the children of Israel refuse to keep my commands and my instructions bear in mind the Lord has given you the sabbath the Lord has given it to us for our benefit and this of course is stressed in the New Testament the Lord has given you the sabbath that is why on the sixth day he has given you bread for two days this was to be a testing of the children of Israel whether they would be obedient or not now the

Lord revealed to Moses that this was to be God's provision for them throughout the 40 years in the desert and he ordered Moses to take an omer that is a jar of the manna and to keep it for generations to come and later on you will find that this jar of manna was to be kept in the ark of the covenant so it would be proof to following generations of the Israelites that God had provided for his people in the wilderness and they ate it of course for 40 years until they came to the borders of Canaan Now it's unlikely that this was the only item of diet no doubt there were other things that they could eat on the way but this was their basic staple diet this was their staff of life throughout that time it was a daily dependence upon God for his provision Now just a few words about what was rather difficult to understand about the actual gathering of the manna Verse 17

They did as they were told some gathered much some gathered little and when they measured it by the homer he who gathered much did not have too much and he who gathered little did not have too little each one gathered as much as he needed Does this mean that the lazy people who just put in a handful into their jar when they came home and found it was miraculously multiplied into as much as they needed?

I don't think so I think what is meant here is that each one gathered their jar full and then brought it perhaps and a group of them would pull their resources so there was enough for every individual I don't think we can say that those who were very diligent and gathered lots and lots when they came home they found there was just enough for themselves and no more but rather I think it speaks of sharing each one did their part they played their part by gathering what they needed and then they shared that everyone had enough to eat now again I think we shouldn't spiritualize the story too much but what it does teach us I believe is that we must rely dearly upon God for his provision you remember the petition that the Lord taught us in the Lord's prayer give us each day or give us today our daily bread the Israelites learned in a very practical way that lesson and we must learn it too it doesn't mean to say that we've got to go out shopping every day to get our daily bread but it does mean that we have to be conscious that daily we rely upon

[25 : 49] God for his supply in that physical temporal way there's a deeper application also that in the same way that the Israelites relied on God for their daily temporal needs so we must rely upon him daily for our spiritual needs that is why it is important for us to study the scriptures daily to pray to him daily not just once a week or once in a while but daily we need grace for each day each day has the troubles of its own but each day also has the grace of God available to help us to face these troubles God provided manna every day for them and God provides grace for us each day too so let us look to him day by day in faith relying upon him for his supply but what about the Sabbath is it still applicable well of course it is but it is the

Christian Sabbath it is the Lord's day no longer that seventh day Sabbath but the first day of the week the day of rejoicing at the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ but yet still the day of rest the day of worship and the day in which we do works of necessity and mercy the Sabbath was a test and you'll notice that throughout the Old Testament it was a test of the covenant people whether they were really obeying God or not I believe it still is for the Christian church not in any legalistic way but rather it is a test of whether we put God first giving him the honour of one day in seven that is some of what we have learned tonight first of all going back to the very beginning of what we said grumbling complaining is absolutely wrong for the Christian when we are faced by problems as we undoubtedly will when we are faced with temptations to doubt whether God really loves us or not let us bring it to the

Lord as Moses did let us not grumble and complain and blame one another or blame our leaders or blame God let us come before him and honestly open our hearts to him and say well Lord I am puzzled I don't know what is happening and turn over our problems and our complaints to the Lord and look to him for his supply the second lesson we learn surely is that obedience to God leads to blessing disobedience leads to chastisement or doesn't lead to being cast off forever unless there is a final impenitence disobedience leads to God's chastisement as it did with these Israelites and God tests us he tests our obedience in various ways and when we obey him we are blessed now that doesn't mean that we will be immune to further temptation doesn't mean it will be immune to further suffering perhaps it may mean indeed it will qualify to face even greater suffering for him that's what I say the most difficult lessons to learn in the

Christian life because we are tempted to say I've been obedient I've done my best I've committed my life to him I've done everything I think is necessary and yet I've been faced with an even greater challenge now it's not fair but that I believe is God's way of dealing with us that we will be even more sanctified even more delivered from trusting in ourselves and trusting in this world and being led to lean more upon him obedience leads to blessing yes but it doesn't lead to immunity from further testing and further suffering God continues to test his people not to destroy them but rather to strengthen them to lead them to a greater faith and dependence upon him so let's learn from the experience of Moses and the Israelites God is the same God today he is faithful and true to his word he revealed himself as

I am the Lord I have committed myself to you as the one who will act for your salvation he had shown his great power by delivering them from Egypt and now he was their daily needs as they went on through the wilderness and that is what he does to you and me he has brought us out of our land of bondage out of the bondage of sin by the great victory of the Lord Jesus Christ and so we are called to go on in humble dependence upon him day by day he is faithful to his word may he enable us to be faithful and obedient to him let's pray gracious God and father we give thanks for your word and for what it teaches of your faithfulness your goodness and your bountiful provision oh Lord deliver us from complaining and grumbling and help us to submit ourselves to you help us to recognize when we have been chastised and disciplined because of our disobedience because of our faithlessness and help us Lord to respond in the right way by committing ourselves to you and by asking for a spirit of obedience and of service hear us

[31 : 12] Lord and forgive us for Jesus sake Amen