

**Exodus 15:22-27 (1984 NIV)**  
***From Sweet Song to Bitter Waters***

**Introduction**

Sometimes, fact seems stranger than fiction. The New York Daily News once carried a report which read like this:

“Fagilyu Mukhametzyanov, a 49-year-old woman in Kazan, the 6<sup>th</sup> most populous city in Russia, was mistakenly declared dead by doctors.

But she later woke up—in a coffin surrounded by sobbing relatives. She started screaming after realizing she was about to be buried alive.

She then suffered a heart attack brought on by the shock of waking up at her own funeral.

She was rushed to the hospital where she was declared dead—this time for real.”

(<http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/russian-woman-fagilyu-mukhametzyanov-dies-funeral-mistaken-dead-article-1.126833>)

The line separating life and death can be so thin—one moment you are alive, the next you are dead. Life can be so uncertain, death can be so sudden. This seems to be the reality that the Israelites were grappling with in Ex 15. They came out of the raging waters of the Red Sea alive, cheating certain death. But soon after, they came to the oasis of Marah, facing the impending fate of death from thirst. Today's focal text (Ex 15:22-27) is about Israel's trial with water supply. Through it all, God was teaching His people lessons about themselves and Himself.

In Ex 15, we see that ...

- The deliverance of the Israelites and the defeat of the Egyptians is the occasion for the song which is recorded in Exodus 15:1-21—it is a triumphant song.
- In this song, the “hand/arm of God” is mentioned 6 times to depict God's deliverance, protection, provision, preservation, guidance, and comfort for His people.
- They have been delivered from slavery, they have been given a new life, and they have witnessed God destroying their enemies in the depths of the Red Sea.
- Now, three days later, they are faced with a trial.
- After three days with little/no water, they come to a place called Marah.

So what can we learn today in Israel's experience from triumph in the Red Sea to trial at Marah?

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## **I. We learn about life as it is on earth.**

Verses 22-23: Then Moses led Israel from the Red Sea and they went into the Desert of Shur. For three days they traveled in the desert without finding water. When they came to Marah, they could not drink its water because it was bitter. (That is why the place is called Marah.)

### 1. Life has its ups and downs.

Do not assume that once you sign up to follow the Lord, everything is going to be perfect and life will be all smooth. In vv. 22-23, Israel came out of the Red Sea and onto dry land—land so dry that they suffered from dry mouths!

There is a spiritual reality for us here—there is every reason to expect trials from time to time in the Christian life no matter how good the times may be now.

Look at v. 22—“Then Moses led Israel from the Red Sea ...” This can be literally translated as “Moses caused Israel to set out from the Red Sea”. It pictures Israel’s reluctance to leave the Red Sea—they were totally and absolutely mesmerized and stunned by the walls of departed waters around them and the dry land they were standing on. So Moses had to jolt them and hurry them to leave the sea so as to move on.

Then they arrived at this oasis after three days with little/no water, but the waters there were bitter. Put yourself in their shoes. They got to this pool but the waters were undrinkable. The bitterness might even suggest something that was actually poisonous. The trial that Israel was facing was real and severe.

So just imagine this—a trial that broke Israel’s spirit just after the great national deliverance. Does that ever happen to you?

- God helps you through something that you thought you could never get through.
- He answers prayers in a remarkable way, and then suddenly you get to a place that completely nullifies all the good times and your spirit is broken.
- All of a sudden and in double quick time, your delight turns into despair.

### 2. God is the Master of life.

When Israel arrived at Marah, the people seemed to forget all the wonderful things God had done for them. They forgot about the plagues, their deliverance, and the miracle at the Red Sea. They forgot that the Lord had been in absolute control all along. They forgot that God is the Master of life—both of the good times and the bad.

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Sounds a lot like us doesn't it? Just let a difficulty come and we hang down our heads in defeat and throw up our hands in despair. We forget that the same God who was in control on a good day is still on the throne on a bad day.

The remedy for this spiritual amnesia is to REMEMBER. Remember God's gracious deliverance and redemption. Establish it in your memory. Memorialize it. Journal it, reread it, recall it, and retell it from time to time.

I remember one day my younger daughter, Stacey, brought home a neck tie which she had made in her craftwork when she was in K1 (she was about 5 years old then).

When I first saw it, my immediate response in my heart was: "Yucks! What awful colours."

But Stacey said this to me: "Daddy, this is my Father's Day present for you." She then hung it round my neck.

Almost immediately, my attitude changed. I felt myself liking the tie very much because it was a gift from my child, never mind it was not exactly pretty.

So, I had the tie round my neck in the house for a long while. I was proud of it.

And you know, I had also made a photo copy of this tie and laminated it. And I have kept it with me since 1999!

Until today it helps me remember that gesture of innocent, child-like love of Stacey for me as her father. And that remembrance helps me to give thanks to God for her.

Much more precious than memories of the love of an earthly daughter are those of the love of our Heavenly Father.

- I love my child, but when he/she rejects my love, I am hurt because I lose something. Human love is very much self-centred.
- God loves a child of His, but when he/she rejects His love, He too is hurt not because He loses something, but the child loses something which God and only God can give. God's love is always others-centred.

The memories of God's love for us need not always be as dramatic as parting of the Red Sea. But just something as ordinary as a piece of craftwork will extraordinarily magnify His love and grace for us while we are walking with Him here on earth.

Such an act of remembering will awaken in us joy in God, and a deep sense of gratitude for how He loves us, knows us, and keeps us.

And what we learn about God in both the good and bad times of life will shape our perception of who God is and what He can do for us. Every situation in life serves as ministry of the Lord to us. *In all of life, God is simply working to make us more like Christ.*

## **II. We learn about our old life in the flesh.**

Verse 24: So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "What are we to drink?"

### 1. The old life in the flesh is quick to grumble.

When the parched Israelites saw the water ahead, they must have been relieved and ecstatic. Imagine the disappointment, anger, and fear that must have arisen when they tasted the bitterness of the water.

It's often natural to take our complaints to a friend, spouse, or pastor because we want to be heard, comforted, and maybe even affirmed in our worries. Why then is prayer and time in the Word so often our second (or even last) response?

- Maybe because we'd rather take control into our own hands rather than wait and trust that God will be faithful in His timing.
- Maybe because we struggle to trust that God cares about every detail of our lives.
- Maybe because we're afraid that God will provide in a way different from what we were hoping for.

When we get into a tight spot, we seem to forget the greatness of God and He suddenly becomes very small. And our SELF becomes very big. We become the centrepiece and the focus of our every thought and motive.

Just three days before, the people of Israel had seen the Lord destroy the greatest army in the then known world. They had seen God part a great sea and deliver them. Then they had seen Him take that same sea and use it to drown their enemies. When these things happened, they opened their mouths and praised the Lord in song. Now they were standing by a pool of bitter waters ... and complaining.

In v. 24, the response of the children of Israel to this difficulty was disappointing because their response was faithlessness. We have been told earlier in Exodus 15 that the children of Israel believed God because of what He had done to the Egyptians. But now, their faith failed.

Verse 24 reveals Israel's attitude: "... so the people grumbled at Moses." This is the first time that the verb "grumble" or "murmur" appears in the OT, but it

will reappear over and over again in the OT Bible to describe the behaviour of Israel. Israel's faith was tested and it was found wanting.

Sighting the waters at Marah must have brought great rejoicing to the Israelites. They thought their thirst would be quenched; their cattle would be watered; their reserves would be replenished. What a disappointment it must have been to discover that the waters were bitter, and thus unfit for consumption. Their joy at discovering water turned quickly to anger at Moses for leading them to such a place. They did not hesitate to place the responsibility for their predicament squarely on the shoulders of Moses. They demanded that he should come up with a solution.

So why is it so human to play the blame game on others? I think one reason is this—we can grumble without thinking, but we cannot be grateful without thinking thankfully of some things. So it is always easier to grumble than to be grateful.

Israel grumbled at their enslavement; grumbled when Moses came on the scene; grumbled as they now wandered in the wilderness. I want to submit to you that their complaining wasn't so much rooted in their circumstance, but very much in their heart.

The same is true for us. A heart of gratitude and thankfulness isn't merely dependent on our bank account, or doctor's diagnosis, or the praise we receive for a job well done. This implies that thanklessness and grumbling—regardless of our situation, even our suffering—reflect our heart condition.

## 2. The old life in the flesh is slow to trust God.

The challenge arises when we think that we know what we need better than God does. However, God looks at what we need with eternal eyes, while we often look through temporal ones. In God's grace, despite the grumbling of the Israelites, He heard their cries and intervened. We too need to remember that God sees our needs and will be faithful to provide what we truly need in His desired timing and from His eternal perspective.

Whether we are faced with an unfulfilled desire or a legitimate need, entrusting it to the Lord and waiting on Him can be some of the most faith-stretching experiences. While the body of Christ is a helpful and God-given gift to us, we need to make sure that we are bringing ourselves to Christ and His truth before anyone and anything else.

Sometimes we find ourselves in a position similar to the Israelites—facing a problem that no one can solve apart from divine intervention. As painful and trying as these seasons can be, they are also opportunities to watch God work in ways that display His glory. The Lord could have chosen to lead the Israelites to water that had been sweet, but He chose to allow them the temporary disappointment and test of faith so as to show them His power in an undeniable way.

There is a story of a king who offered a prize to the artist who could paint the best picture of peace. Many artists tried, and the king finally chose two of the best. From these two, he had to choose one to receive the prize.

The first picture was of a perfectly calm lake, with majestic mountains around it. The sky was pure blue with soft fluffy clouds. All who saw that picture thought that surely it would win the prize. It appeared to be the very essence of peace.

The second picture was very different. It also showed a lake, but the wind was creating high waves. The mountains around the lake were bare and rugged. Above was a turbulent sky with rain and lightning. Down the side of the mountain tumbled a raging waterfall. This painting did not look peaceful at all.

But when the king looked closer, he saw behind the waterfall a tiny bush growing in a crack in the rock. In the bush, a mother bird had built her nest. There, in the midst of the rush of angry water and noise, sat the mother bird on her nest ... in perfect peace.

Which picture won the prize? The king chose the second picture. "Because," explained the king, "peace does not mean the absence of noise, trouble or hard work. Peace means to be in the midst of all these things and still be calm in your heart. That is the real meaning of peace."

(<http://storiesforpreaching.com/category/sermonillustrations/peace>)

Israel was slow to trust God because the heart of their problem was the problem of their heart. As a result of this heart problem, they would complain and grumble regardless of their circumstances. Even when God had provided food for them in the barren wilderness, they would still complain and grumble—they wanted quail and not just manna.

Allow me to paraphrase their complaint in Num 11:4-6: "If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost—also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this unsavoury manna!"

God delivered His people not by removing the Red Sea, but by opening up the Red Sea and making them walked through it. This is how God teaches us to trust Him—not by removing, or leading us to avoid or to go round the storm we face, but by helping us walk through the storm with Him in our midst.

*We overcome the old life in the flesh when we humble ourselves to let God's will be fulfilled, and not grumble that our will is not fulfilled.*

### III. We learn that God is Jehovah Rapha.

Verses 25-27: Then Moses cried out to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a piece of wood. He threw it into the water, and the water became sweet. There 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 your God and do what 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.” Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs and seventy palm trees, and they camped there near the water.

In vv. 25-27, we see the refreshing, surprising response of God's grace. In v. 25, Moses was helpless as he was no miracle worker who had independent power apart from God to work wonders to get Israel out of their messes. So he CRIED OUT to God. And that's what Israel should have done, like what they did in Ex 2 when they cried out to God in their Egyptian bondage. But somehow, in the midst of this trial, they had forgotten it. So Moses did it for them—on their behalf, Moses CRIED OUT to God. He became their intercessor.

God has called us as a kingdom of priests to intercede for one another, and sometimes we will need to intercede for one another when our faith is faltering. We'll need to intercede for others just like Moses doing it for the grumbling Israelites. We will need to cry out to God for people when they don't seem to have the strength in themselves to go on.

Moses cried out to God and the Lord miraculously sweetened the waters. He showed Moses a piece of wood and Moses threw it into the waters.

There was no word of rebuke, there was no word of chastising, but there's a sweet and gracious answer from God—He made the waters drinkable.

You remember that God cursed Egypt and made their drinkable water undrinkable in the 1<sup>st</sup> plague (Ex 7). Now, the first miracle in the wilderness is to make this undrinkable desert water drinkable. Do you see the pattern of how God turns blessing into curse for those who hate Him, but turns curse into blessing for those on whom He has set His love? Do you see God's patience and grace on people who had suffered from faith failure here?

There is no naturalistic explanation for solving the mystery of the transformation of this bitter water. This is sheer supernaturalism. This is God acting and the whole passage emphasizes that the Hebrew people are totally dependent upon God to act in their favour for survival.

Moses cried out to the Lord who showed him a piece of wood, which he cast into the water, causing it to become sweet. The transformation of the waters of Marah (which means “bitter”) was a miracle. The casting of the wood into

the waters of Marah must have been a symbolic act, like Moses raising his staff over the waters of the Red Sea.

God followed up on this miracle by giving a regulation in v. 26: “If you listen carefully to me and do what is right in my eyes, if you pay attention to my commands and keep all my 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 says this in v. 26 about Himself: “...I am the Lord, who heals you.”

“The Lord heals” means He is “Jehovah Rapha”. The people must learn to trust in Him as the one who would bring healing to their condition, both physically and spiritually.

The point is this: It's not enough for the people of God to sing and to rejoice; they must also listen to God, do what is right in His eyes, pay attention to His commands, and keep all His decrees. Simply put, they must not only sing and rejoice in His deliverance; they must also obey Him. Freedom from service to Pharaoh doesn't mean “anything goes” for the children of Israel. Freedom from service to Pharaoh means freedom to serve God. Service to Pharaoh was slavery. Service to God is itself true freedom. But true freedom always calls for obedience to God as we listen to Him.

Now notice that God sweetened the waters first before He called the Israelites to listen to Him, do right in His eyes, pay attention to His commands, and keep His decrees. What this implies is this—the grace of God is given to us so that we can respond not with indulgence, but with obedience. Very often, the obstruction to the Lord's promise of healing is not His lack of willingness to heal, but the lack of obedience on the part of His people. God would not treat His people like He had treated the Egyptians, but His people must walk with Him and obey Him.

But this presents us with a dilemma—none of us are able to walk the path of obedience with perfection or complete purity. This is where the Gospel shines in with all its power and glory. The Gospel tells us that there's One who walked the path of perfect obedience for us—Jesus Christ.

- When we come to Him, we are covered by His perfect righteousness.
- This of course must not give rise to thoughts of lawlessness on our part, as if the righteousness of Christ could be manipulated by us as a license to sin.
- In truth, the person who comes to Christ will never dare consider that The Lord's righteousness is in any way a license for sin.

Here we begin to understand that what God did for Israel at the waters of Marah, He also does for the hearts of all who will come to Christ—He changes the bitter into sweet, the curse of death into blessing of life.

- The Christian faith is not so much about making morally bad people become morally good people. You don't need Christianity to do that.



- The Christian faith is very much about God making spiritually dead people become spiritually living people in Jesus Christ.
- Some of you here are not yet believers in Jesus Christ. And you may seem stuck in the bitter waters of life.
- The Bible describes Jesus Christ as the Living Waters who comes from God. And today God may be calling you to come to Jesus Christ.
- The troubled waters that you are in now may not be meant by God to drown you, but to lead you to swim to the Living Waters of Jesus Christ—waters that will give you life in Jesus Christ; a life that is new and eternally with Him in heavenly bliss.
- We invite you to talk with us after the service so that we can share more with you what it means for you to receive Jesus Christ as God's gift of Living Waters for you.

The test mentioned in v. 25 is not used by God to hinder/deter His people, but to reveal to them their weakness so that they will come to acknowledge how much they need God. So, we see clearly in v. 27 God's kind providential care for His people when they came to Elim.

- Elim means "terebinth trees" and apparently these trees were the most distinctive mark of that oasis in the wilderness.
- The numbers twelve (12 springs) and seventy (70 palm trees) are typically symbolic in that they very often point to fullness in Hebrew literature. It seems to suggest the fullness of God's provision for all of His people.
- You see, it's not just that Israel is delivered by God's grace at the Red Sea; it's also that Israel is kept and preserved by His grace in the wilderness.

*The magnitude of God's healing grace is in this truth—we're not only delivered from sin by the saving grace of God, but we're also protected, provided and preserved by His sustaining grace.*

## Conclusion

The "Song of the Sea" and the "Bitter Waters of Marah" are contrasting accounts, but accounts which have a direct relationship to each other. Three applications are crucial for effective witness and outreach today:

1. We need to apply the affirmation of our faith in worship in the activities of our daily walk. Israel had just proclaimed her faith in God as her warrior (15:3), but she was unable to trust in God as her water provider (15:22-26). If God could deal with the waters of the Red Sea, surely He could be trusted to deal with the waters of Marah. Israel should have been able to apply the faith she affirmed in the "Song of the Sea" to her dilemma at the "Bitter Waters of Marah", but she did not.

Lest we become unnecessarily perturbed at the Israelites for their lack of faith, and become a little proud of ourselves, let me suggest that the

problem which Israel illustrates is also one of the greatest problems of Christians in every age, including our own. We often fail to apply our faith in God as we transit from worship to work; from devotion to daily activities.

When we gather to worship God, we sing many hymns and choruses which express our faith in God. We sing “Great Is Thy Faithfulness”, and then go our ways fretting and worrying about the petty details of our lives as though God was not faithful at all. We sing “All The Way My Saviour Leads Me”, but when some trouble comes our way, our trust and obedience flounder.

The point is simply this: It is a great deal easier to affirm our faith in worship than it is to apply our faith in our walk. Here is where the rubber meets the road. It is not that we need to worship less, but it is that we must apply more in our daily walk those truths which we affirm in our worship.

One of the contributing factors to our failure in applying our faith in daily walk is that we tend to create false distinctions between those areas which are sacred (e.g. church, public worship) and those which are secular (e.g. work, daily living). A more careful look at the Law of Moses will reveal that it was to govern and guide God’s people in the minute details of their daily lives, not their lives in the tabernacle or temple.

2. We need eyes of faith so that we will not apply human wisdom to spiritual issues. Not only did Israel fail to apply their faith to their situation at Marah, they also failed to see their problem as spiritual. In the text we read that the Israelites protested against Moses, BUT not pleading to God (v. 24). They demanded that Moses produce water for them, BUT they did not cry to God for water. When the Israelites were trapped between the Egyptian army and the Red Sea they cried out to God for help. Here at Marah, they immediately confronted Moses, and ignored God altogether.

Ironically, the Israelites forgot that the pillar of cloud was still guiding them (see 13:21-22), and that God Himself was present with them in the cloud.

God’s people must be wary of falling into the very same trap. May we be wary of the tendency to immediately resort to secular or human solutions, and not seeking God for His wisdom.

3. We need to let the seasons of life grow us to become faith-strengthened and not fair-weather people of God. God did not allow the Israelites to stay by the sea, singing their glorious song. Instead, God led the Israelites into the desert, allowing them to be thirsty, and giving them bitter water. This adverse situation tested the faith of the

Israelites, and provided the occasion for God to teach His people an important lesson. Expecting to experience life on a continuous high is not only unrealistic, it is unbiblical. Why? This is because the God of the Bible is the same God who is with us in both the good and bad times. So God uses the good and bad in life to grow us to become faith-strengthened people, and not fair-weather people.

A woman's husband had been slipping in and out of a coma for several months, yet she had stayed by his bedside every single day. One day, when he came to, he motioned for her to come nearer.

As she sat by him, he whispered, eyes full of tears, "You know what? You have been with me all through the bad times. When I got fired, you were there to support me. When my business failed, you were there. When I got shot, you were by my side. When we lost the house, you stayed right here. When my health started failing, you were still by my side. You know what?"

The wife gently asked, smiling as her heart began to be filled with warmth, "What dear?"

The man answered, "I think you're bad luck."

When bad times come, we may grumble that God is bad luck. We need to change our mindset—i.e. we are to be grateful and give thanks for God for being with us even in the bad and difficult times.

So thank God for the times of victory and elation, but do not expect things to stay this way always. Yet be reassured that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Rom 8:28).

*Let God be our Lord at all times by seeking and obeying His way and will in all seasons of our lives.*