

Place: Lurgan Baptist 6:10:2013

Reading: Exodus 15: 22-27

MOSES, THE SERVANT OF THE LORD

12. TURNING BITTERNESS INTO BLESSING

Arthur John Gossip was an outstanding Scottish preacher who died in 1954. When he was pastor of the Beechgrove Church in Aberdeen, Scotland, his wife died. The year was 1927. On the first Sunday after he had buried his wife, Dr. Gossip preached in his church as usual. And the message he brought that morning was entitled “ *But when life tumbles in, what then ?* ” It was probably the best message he had ever preached. Sustained by his strong faith, the lonely, heartbroken Pastor told his people, “ *I don't think you need to be afraid of life. Our hearts are very frail, and there are places where the road is very steep and lonely. But we have a wonderful God.* ” Arthur Gossip had come to Marah and he had turned bitterness into blessing. Sooner or later each of us will come to Marah. As an old Arabic proverb puts it, “ *sooner or later the black camel kneels in front of every tent.* ” It happens to everybody doesn't it?

I mean here's some business venture, and it shows great promise and it turns out to be very bitter. A marriage experience and you're so excited about it, and it turns bitter. A new job, and the job you think is going to be great, and all of a sudden it turns bitter. Have you been

to Marah ? “ *Marah,* ” means “ *bitter.* ” What have you experienced that has made life bitter ? What has robbed you of your joy and comfort ? Has sickness ? Has it been the loss of a loved one ? Financial reverse, the rebellion of children, the fracture of a friendship, turmoil in your family ? Do you seem to be in a place where circumstances are impossible ? Well, look at Israel. They had been delivered from bondage by the blood of the lamb. They had witnessed God's mighty acts at the Red sea. They were jubilant and dancing after Gods wonderful triumph over Egypt. But what comes next ? To put the question in terms of the Christian life, what comes after saving faith ? The long hard, difficult process of being conformed to the holiness of God. The Israelites made a decisive break with sin when they left Egypt, but the sanctification process had only begun. This started as the music stopped. As the last chords of Miriam's song died away, “ *so Moses brought Israel from the Red Sea and they went out into the wilderness of Shur.* ” (15:22)

Now they may well have expected to head straight for Canaan, going from grace to glory. Instead their triumph was followed by tribulation, for the Promised Land could only be reached by the way of the wilderness. Now going through the wilderness was not necessary for Israel's salvation, but it was necessary for their sanctification. My ... is this not where we are ? We are now living in the wilderness between the first and second advents of Jesus Christ. He came once to save us, He will come again to take us home. But in the meantime we are on a long and difficult pilgrimage, which the Lord is using to make us holy. I mean we will

face disappointment, and difficulty, discouragement and doubt. For do you see Israel now ? Moses leads them into the wilderness. Then came three days of testing for they were without water. (15:22) Then they saw it water ran to drink only to find it bitter and undrinkable. ***In a moment they descended from the heights of joy to the valley of sorrow.*** But they soon discovered that their God can turn bitterness into sweetness. ***How does God do it ?*** Well look at this passage and notice,

(1) THE MOUNTING CRISIS

I say mounting for did you notice the **Deficiency of Water:** A single day in the wilderness without water would be tolerable, two days would be difficult but three days especially for the children and animals, would be impossible. Then there was the **Defilement of Water:** for the water they drank was bitter. I can hear them say, “ *I thought God had met out needs.* ” What you and I must never forget is that God ***led*** them there. (13:21-22) God didn’t send them there. He led them there. You see, no matter how bitter or confusing the situation is, when you are following God, you can confidently say, “ *God led me here.* ” He was here long before I was. This has not taken God by surprise in the least little bit. *The Lord tests us to encourage spiritual growth and bring out the best in us, but the devil tempts us to encourage spiritual immaturity and bring out the worst in us.* Do you recall the testimony of Job ? “ *But He knoweth the way that I take when he hath tried me I shall come forth as gold.* ” (Job 23:10) (1) Now notice,

(a) THE ‘WHEN,’ OF THIS CRISIS:

“ *And when they came to Marah,* ” (15:23) Now you will miss the impact of this little story if you ignore its context. They had just passed through the Red Sea. They had seen the Red Sea come together and drown the Egyptian army that was pursuing them. Then they started singing. Listen to them, “ *Who is like unto thee, O Lord, among the gods ? who is like thee, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders ?* ”

Look at (15: 17-18) My if you had walked in on that service, heard that singing and shouting and praising, you would have thought here are people who have arrived. They have it made. All their trials are behind them. With faith like that, with confidence like that, nothing can stop them. And in three days they are facing a test and wallowing in failure. I mean they immediately forget everything they had previously said. “ *I thought the Lord was going to reign forever and ever. I thought there was no God like your God. I thought Lord, you were going to lead us into the land.* ”

Do you see them murmuring, grumbling and griping? You see, ***the greatest successes of life are often followed by failure, and the greatest blessings of life are followed by testing.*** Do you recall Simon Peter ? The Lord Jesus asked, “ *Whom do men say that I the Son of man am ?* ” (Matt 16:13) Everybody gives their opinion, and then Simon Peter opens his mouth and something right comes out. He says, “ *Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.* ” And Jesus says, “ *Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in*

heaven.” You have been the recipient of divine revelation. What a moment this was. What blessing. Simon has been singled out by God to receive a revelation that none of the other disciples had really accurately and fully received. And what so often happens is that when you have one great spiritual experience, you get to thinking that makes you an expert in all things spiritual. And the very next moment, Christ is saying to the same man, “ *Get thee behind me, Satan,*” (Matt 16:23) ***Success followed by failure. Blessing followed by testing.*** “ *And there he proved them,*” The Lord didn’t prove them in the miraculous happenings like the Red Sea. He tests and proves them when they are up against the daily routine of life. Miracles never produce faith. The training ground is when you wonder where your next drop of water is coming from. Perhaps Moses though he miscalculated. Did he think, “ *I wonder where I missed God. Surely this is not the will of God.*” But it was. For we read “ *And there he proved them,*” There was (a) but there was,

(b) THE ‘ WHY,’ OF THIS CRISIS:

Do you remember the chorus we used to sing in Sunday School ?

**My Lord knows the way through the wilderness,
All I have to do is follow
Strength for today is mine always
My Lord knows the way through the wilderness
All I have to do is follow**

But that’s the trouble isn’t it ? Following, trusting and obeying. Remember, oh, keep remembering, that they are redeemed people. They are on the line of march. God had marked their route on the map, and they are following it. They are not out of the will of God. They are at Marah because God sent them to Marah. The Lord allowed this to happen for we read in the Psalms that “ *He led them forth by the right way.*” (Ps 107:7) Why ? “ *And there he proved them.*” (15:25) The word “ *proved,*” means “ *to put something to the test.*” Do you recall what God says in (Deut 8:2) ? “ *And thou shalt remember all the way the Lord thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness, to humble thee, and to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldest keep his commandments or no.*” James says, “ *Count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations. Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience.*” (James 1:2-3)

My God is not punishing you, God is educating you, God is refining you, God is maturing you. Are you at Marah this ? Do circumstances seem impossible ? Well, the Lord is using that to strengthen your faith, your character, your perseverance. Right now it may see a mess, but it’s really a test. How did the Israelites do on their test ? What grade did they make ?

(2) THE MURMURING CROWD

Are you prone to complaining ? To grumbling ? Did you ever hear that song entitled “ *The Grumblers ?*”

*O they grumble on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday
They grumble on Thursday too
Grumble on Friday, Saturday, Sunday
They grumble the whole week through*

Is this you ? Have you forgotten that God is the One who made your circumstances what they are ? *You see, the problem is not when we come to Marah, the real problem is when we allow Marah to get into us.* What an unspeakable tragedy it is for a Christian to live in such a way that when he dies it is said, *“ He never got Marah, bitterness out of him.”* Now remember what happened to Israel is an example to us for Paul says, *“ Neither murmur ye as some of them also murmured and were destroyed.”* (1 Cor 10:10) Do you know what Paul says *“ Do all thing without murmurings and disputing.”* (Phil 2:14) A man known for his constant complaining, inherited a large sum of money. When he got it he complained about how it was not as much as he thought it should be. He bought a farm and asked his wife, what she thought they would name it. She replied, *“ Why don't you call it Belly Acres ?”* My are you a belly acher ?

One moment Israel were singing and dancing the next they were murmuring against the Lord. For Moses says, *“ Your murmurings are not against us but against the Lord.”* (16:8) Why did Israel murmur at Marah ? Because their eye was no longer on the Lord. They were forgetful of God. Do you know how the psalmist put it ? *“ Our fathers understood not Thy wonders in Egypt, they remembered not the multitude of Thy mercies, but provoked Him at the sea, even the Red Sea.”*

(Ps 106:7) Why did they pout instead of pray ? One word. Forgetfulness. I heard about three sisters aged 92, 94, and 96, who lived together. One night the 96 year old filled a bath, She put one foot in and then paused. *“ Was I getting in the bath or out of the bath,”* she yelled. The 94 year old shouted back, *“ I don't know I'll come and see.”* So she started up the stairs. But she stopped at the first step. She shouted, *“ Was I going up or coming down ?”* The 92 year old was sitting in the kitchen having tea. She shook her head and said, *“ I sure hope I never get that forgetful.,”* and knocked on wood for good measure. Then she replied, *“ I'll come up and help you both as soon as I see who is at the door.”* Why did they murmur ? They were forgetful. You see,

(a) They were Forgetful of God's Servant:

“ And the people murmured against Moses,” (15:24) It is so hard to believe this. Here was Moses who led them out of Egypt under the mighty hand of God, the man of God, who raised his hand and wielded the rod of God and parted the waters and delivered the people. You would think they would remember that, but the very moment they get into a tight situation, what do they do? They forget. And they began to accuse Moses, and blame Moses, and murmur against Moses. Ron Dunn says ***“ The greatest services of life are often followed by forgetfulness.”*** My do you know something ? You need to get to ready to be unappreciated. There is something about human nature that can, in a moment, forget a record of faithful service. Many a pastor's ministry has been wiped out

because one carnal, backslidden person says something and people believe it. Do you realise that you are going to be unappreciated many times in your Christian life and service ? (a)

(b) They were Forgetful of God's Supremacy:

They not only forgot about Moses. They forgot about God. You read back through that hymn in this chapter and you'll discover its all about the Lord. " *Who is like unto thee O Lord ?*" (15:11) All about God's supremacy, God's sovereignty, and God's salvation. It ought to have been unmistakably clear to them that God was *for them* and *with them*. (13:21) Yet now they are whining and moaning about bitter water. Why ? Because they were forgetful of God. In that situation that you find so difficult, have you taken your eyes off God ? Do you need afresh to tune your ears to the Word of God, to focus your eyes on the Christ of God, and to rest your heart on the Sufficiency of God ? My how do you react in the time of testing ? How did Moses react ? (1) (2) but do you see here,

(3) THE MOVING CRY

" *And Moses cried unto the Lord,*" (15:25)

(a) HE ACTED PRUDENTLY:

He could have taken this personally. If you look over at (16:8) you'll see what Moses says. It is to the credit of Moses that he never took those murmurings personally. My you are going to be in deep trouble if you take

things personally. You need to remember that you are His servant, His ambassador. If you take things personally it will make you bitter and resentful. You'll start whining in self pity. Don't take it personally. Don't take it out on the people. Do you see the self control that Moses exercised ? You never find him turning against the people and saying, " *This is your fault, and you don't appreciate me.*" Moreover he did not resign. He could have said " *Lord it is enough.*" (1 Kings 19:4) " *Lord I cannot carry on with the responsibility of having two to three million fretting and murmuring people.*" Is there a pastor listening to me this and you have your letter of resignation written ? Is there a missionary out there and you are about to call it quit's? Is there a believer here and your tired of the burden of that Sunday School, that Good News Club, that Outreach ? My " *it's always too soon to quit.*" (a)

(b) HE ACTED PRAYERFULLY:

" *And he cried unto the Lord,*" (15:25) Do you know that there are two kinds of Christians in this meeting this morning ? There are those who complain and then there are those who cry unto the Lord. And when Moses cried out to God, his one little prayer accomplished more than all the murmurings of the Israelites. I wonder is this how we react when life's trials and testing' come upon us ? Do our Marah experiences of bitterness drive us to prayer ? (Ps 107) Over and over again in the Scriptures we find this principle operating. Do you recall James words " *Is any among you afflicted ? Let him pray.*" (James 5:13) " *Let him relate his situation of trial and testing at Marah to the Lord Himself.*"

This is the way of victory. We must expect God's proving but instead of murmuring we must turn to the Lord in prayer. Now when Moses prayed the Lord showed him a remedy. (15:25) Prayer brings revelation. How significant this is. The Lord showed him a tree. Gods remedy for bitterness is a tree. This is,

(4) THE MIRACULOUS CURE

The Lords solution for the bitter waters of Marah seemed to be utterly absurd. Moses was to cast the wood of a tree into those waters. He could have argued that such a strategy did not make sense, but he did as he was told and the waters were made sweet. What does this tree symbolise? The Lord Jesus and His cross. You see,

(a) THE PERSON OF THE CROSS CAN SWEETEN OUR BITTER EXPERIENCES:

In the O.T. Christ is spoken of “ *as the righteous branch.* ” (Jer 23:5) Here at Marah the Lord showed Moses a tree which when he had cast into the waters they were made sweet. (15:25) Oh, how near to the waters of bitterness was the tree of sweetness found. And how close to the suffering Christian is the suffering Son of God. *Have ever noticed that when Peter writes his first epistle its keynote being suffering that beside the suffering pilgrim he places the suffering Son ?* (1 Pet 2:20-21 3:17-18) My we are treading the same desert His dear feet once trod, we are meeting the same trials as he met. Does all of this not bring comfort to our hearts ? (Heb 4:15-16) Christ's Knowledge of us

can turn the Bitterness into Sweetness. My are you at Marah this ? Jesus knows, cares, and understands. Christ's Presence with us can turn the bitterness into sweetness. He does not promise exemption from the trial but he does promise His presence with us in the trial. A man from Philadelphia was ordained to the pastoral ministry. It was a remarkable occasion because only four years earlier he had almost dropped out of the church altogether. The man had dedicated his life to serving the Lord. At the time he was working for the church, attending college, and preparing for the ministry. Then his newborn daughter was diagnosed with muscular dystrophy. As far as the man was concerned, this kind of suffering had never been part of the bargain.

The deal was that he would serve God, and the Lord would bless him. When God did not bless him, he was no longer willing to serve. It was not until he turned his bitterness over to the Lord, that he was restored to joy. *You see, what we encounter may be bitter in itself, but however bitter it is, it does not need to make us bitter.* The problem at Marah was not really the water, bitter though it was, the problem was the bitterness in the hearts of God's people. Do you realise that bitterness does not come in the outward circumstance, but in your inward response? (a)

(b) THE PRINCIPLE OF THE CROSS CAN SWEETEN OUR BITTER EXPERIENCES

For this tree not only speaks of Christ but of His Cross concerning which Peter wrote “ *who his own self bare*

our sins in his own body on the tree.” (1 Pet 2:24) The cross the tree, not only robs death of its sting (Heb 2:14) it robs life of its bitterness. When we bring the principle of the cross to bear upon the sorrows of life we cast the tree into the bitter waters and so make them sweet. How does this work out in practice ? In this way. Are you suffering for righteousness sake ? Are you being falsely accused because of your loyalty to the truth ? Then think of him who “ *was led as a lamb to the slaughter but opened not his mouth.* ” (1 Pet 2:23) Is your heart embittered by cruel slanders and unkind words ? Then go and stand by the Cross and listen to Him who was tormented by earth and hell praying for his murderers ? (Lk 23:43) Is your lot in life a sorrowful one ? Then remember that he was the “ *man of sorrows.* ” (Is 53:3)

If you are embittered because of the trials and afflictions that have befallen you come to the cross and see Him suffering pain and anguish and what was the fruit of it all ? Why sweetness indescribable and it will be the same for you if you will apply the remedy. Throw in the tree. Take Christ right into your bitter experiences and he will transform them and he will transform you. One insignificant tree released a supply enough to quench the thirst of all. Blind Fanny Crosby told of this ever abundant supply at the cross when she wrote,

**Jesus keep me near the cross
There is a precious fountain
Free to all a healing stream
Flows from Calvary’s mountain**

Christ took the sorrow at Lazarus tomb and turned it into the glory of His mighty power. He took sin’s judgment at Calvary and turned it into our salvation. On resurrection morning He took the sorrow of death and turned into the sweetness of everlasting hope. This He can turn your bitterness into blessing. A beautiful incident occurred a few years at a meeting in London. The church was crowded and just under the pulpit was a carriage in which lay a paralysed woman. Before the meeting proper got under way a man led the company in some community hymn singing. One person after another was calling out favourite hymns. Eventually the man stooped over the side of the pulpit and said to the poor paralytic “ *Will you choose a hymn ? What shall it be ?* ” With a smile of heavenly sweetness she replied, “ *Count your blessings.* ” She had thrown in the tree. For her the waters had been made sweet.

My what about you ? Are you at Marah ? Has life tumbled in around you ? Have you yourself become bitter ? Throw in the tree and He will turn your bitterness into sweetness.

***In the cross of Christ I glory,
Towering oe’r the wrecks of time,
All the light of sacred story,
Gathers round its head sublime***

***Bane and blessing, pain and pleasure,
By the Cross are sanctified,
Peace is there that knows no measure,
Joys that through all time abide***