

Israel's Experiences at Marah and Elim

Exodus 15:22-27

Exodus 15:22-27 – “So Moses brought Israel from the Red Sea; then they went out into the Wilderness of Shur. And they went three days in the wilderness and found no water. ²³ Now when they came to Marah, they could not drink the waters of Marah, for they were bitter. Therefore, the name of it was called Marah. ²⁴ And the people complained against Moses, saying, “What shall we drink?” ²⁵ So he cried out to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a tree. When he cast it into the waters, the waters were made sweet.

There He made a statute and an ordinance for them, and there He tested them, ²⁶ and said, “If you diligently heed the voice of the Lord your God and do what is right in His sight, give ear to His commandments and keep all His statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you which I have brought on the Egyptians. For I am the Lord who heals you.”

²⁷ Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve wells of water and seventy palm trees; so they camped there by the waters.”

Background Notes

In Exodus 14 we had the great miracle of the parting of the Red Sea. In the first half of Exodus 15 we had the Song of Moses, when Israel celebrated God's great victory over Pharaoh and the Egyptian army, and His great deliverance of His people Israel. In the last section of Exodus 15 we have the first two places where the children of Israel stopped after their crossing of the Red Sea— Marah and Elim.

There are traditional sites for Marah and Elim on the east side of the Gulf of Suez (which is part of the Red Sea). At the traditional site of Marah the waters are still notoriously bitter or brackish. And at the traditional side of Elim there is still good water and many trees. We can't be dogmatic, and say for sure that these are the actual sites, but there's a pretty good line of tradition behind both of them. It's interesting that these traditional sites of Marah and Elim support the case for the crossing of the Red Sea through the north end of the Gulf of Suez, and not through central part of the Gulf of Aqaba, or at the Straits of Tiran, (the narrow waterway at the southern end of the Gulf of Aqaba).

In verse 26 the Lord said to the children of Israel, “If you diligently heed the voice of the Lord your God, and do what is right in His sight, give ear to His commandments and keep all His statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you which I have brought on the Egyptians. For I am the Lord who heals you.” Many of you are aware of a very good and interesting book entitled *None of These Diseases*, by Dr. S. I. McMillen. In this book, Dr. McMillen shows how God built sanitary measures into His laws for Israel. In other words, if they had followed God's laws about what was clean and what was unclean, and His laws about defilement, and His laws about purification, they would be preserved from the diseases the

Lord had brought upon the Egyptians. They would be protected from germs and contamination and the unsanitary situations that bring on disease. Dr. McMillen shows that many of these laws are still good sanitary measures today. Let me read a few paragraphs from *None of These Diseases*:

“When Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, God made a most remarkable covenant with the new nation. ‘If you will diligently hearken to the voice of the Lord your God, and will do what is right in His sight, and will give ear to His commandments and keep all His statutes, I will put none of these diseases upon you which I have brought upon the Egyptians. For I am the Lord who heals you’ (Exodus 15:26).

None of these diseases—what a promise! Had not the Egyptians and Israelites been afflicted with epidemics for ages? The remedies in their medical books had accomplished practically nothing. Often the “cure” was worse than the disease. Yet here the Lord made a fantastic promise, to free the Israelites from epidemics of the Egyptian diseases.

God proceeded to give Moses a number of commandments that form part of our Bible today. Because these medical directions were altogether different from those in the ancient Egyptian medical books, God surely was not copying from the medical authorities of the day. Would Moses, who had been trained in Egypt’s royal post-graduate universities have enough faith to accept the Divine innovations without adding some of the things he had been taught? From the record we learn that Moses had so much faith in God’s regulations that he did not incorporate a single current medical misconception into the inspired instructions. If Moses had yielded to a natural inclination, to add even a little of his modern university training, we would be reading such prescriptions as “the heel of an Abyssinian Greyhound,” or “the tooth of a donkey crushed in honey.” Not to mention the drugs that the leading physicians were compounding out of bacteria-laden dogs, cats or flies. The Divine instructions were not only devoid of harmful practices, but had many detailed positive recommendations.”

God’s laws were not meant to be a burden for the people. They were for the good of the people in every way—including their health and wellbeing.”

Doctrinal Points

1. God allows the bitter waters of Marah to test His people.

The entire journey of the children of Israel from Egypt to Canaan is a spiritual picture of the Christian life. Every event in the life of the children of Israel as they traveled from Egypt to Canaan illustrates some aspect of the Christian life. I Corinthians 10:11 says, *“Now all these things happened to them [all these events that happened to the children of Israel] are written for our admonition...”* In addition, it says, *“all of these things happened to them as examples.”* The Greek word that’s translated “examples” can also be translated, “types” (spiritual pictures).

The bitter waters of Marah can represent the bitter experiences of life that God allows us to go through. How many of you would agree that there are bitter experiences of life, even in the Christian life? Why does God allow this? Why isn’t the

Christian life just one long happy experience? The end of verse 25 gives us one reason: “*There He tested them.*” God allows His people to come to the bitter waters of Marah to test them.

I Peter 1:7 says, “*the genuineness or proof of your faith is much more precious than gold which perishes, even though it is tested by fire...*” Why? Look at the rest of the verse: “*...because it results in the praise, honor and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ.*” So, when we experience the bitter waters of life, we should not complain as Israel did. Instead we should recognize that God, in His perfect and sovereign ways, has allowed these bitter waters to come our way for a reason -- maybe for a test of our faith.

Notice how the waters were “made sweet.” The Lord showed Moses a tree to throw into the water, and the bitterness was removed from the water! Was this a miracle? Or did this particular variety of tree contain some chemical that was just the right ingredient to react with and counter the bitterness of the water? I tend to think that this was a miracle.

The main point here is that this remedy is also part of the spiritual picture. The tree represents the cross of Christ. When we bring the cross of Christ into the bitter experiences of life, the waters are “made sweet” as we draw close to the Lord. As we go through times of “bitter waters,” when we identify with Christ in His suffering, death and resurrection, we really begin to live in close fellowship with the Lord.

In Philippians 3:10 the apostle Paul said, “*That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death.*” When we are in close fellowship with the Lord in our walk of faith, the bitter waters **can** become sweet -- but we must die to self, and that involves the cross of Christ in our lives. Galatians 2:20 tells us, “*I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live; but Christ lives in me. And the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.*”

Are you experiencing bitter waters in your life right now? Have you applied the cross of Christ in your life? Have you died to self? God allows the bitter waters of Marah to test us.

2. God provides the pure waters of Elim to refresh His people.

Verse 27: “*Then they came to Elim, where there twelve springs and seventy palm trees, and they camped there near the water.*” Praise the Lord! God allows the Marahs in our lives -- but He provides the Elims as well! Aren’t you glad?

We love the Elim experiences of the Christian life, and God provides them to refresh us. We sometimes call them the “mountain-top experiences” of the Christian life. Many times a spiritual retreat, or a Christian camp experience, or a ministry conference can be an Elim experience in our lives. As Psalm 23 says, “*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul...*”

I remember a time in my Christian life when I felt like I was facing ministry burnout. Believe me, it happens! I was discouraged and worn out -- but the Lord in His grace brought me to an Elim! He made me lie down in green pastures, and He **led** me beside still waters. God provides the pure waters of Elim to refresh His people.

In the spiritual picture, notice that the application of the cross to the bitter waters of Marah is followed by the rest of Elim. God provides the pure waters of Elim to refresh His people.

Practical Application

Don't take this promise of healing too far.

At the end of verse 26 the Lord said, "I am the Lord who heals you." Here God revealed Himself as "Jehovah Rapha" - that is, "The Lord who heals." Jehovah Rapha is one the names of God.

This promise of healing was given by God to His people Israel -- He would keep them from disease if they would trust Him and follow Him. It would be "bad hermeneutics" or improper interpretation of Scripture if we, as Christians, were to pull this promise to Israel out of its context and claim this promise of physical healing of every disease and sickness for ourselves.

We know that the Lord can heal, and it's not wrong to pray for healing, and we know that in our resurrected bodies there will be no disease or sickness. However, in the context, the promise of Exodus 15:26 was given to the nation of Israel. For a Christian to claim the promise of physical healing from sickness and disease now would be pulling this Scripture out of its context -- a dangerous practice. So, don't take this promise of healing too far!