

The Bitter Made Sweet

By
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“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. 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. And the people complained against Moses, saying, “What shall we drink?” 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, 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.” Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve wells of water and seventy palm trees; so they camped there by the waters.”

-Exodus 15:22-27

Now that the people of God have been delivered from the tyranny of the Egyptians, they face a far more dangerous enemy, the wilderness itself. While slavery would rob the Israelites of their liberty and their dignity, the wilderness, being barren and hostile to life, could easily rob them of their lives. Within three days of God's deliverance, the people of God are on the verge of surrender because of the lack of water. While it is easy for us to judge the Israelites for their lack of faith, their struggle here is one that is understandable and common for all God's people. So in this study we will take a look at the danger of the wilderness, the nourishment of God, and finally the power of God to turn the bitter things of life into sweetness.

The Wilderness

“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.”

-Matthew 4:1

Biblically, the symbol of the wilderness is a symbol of desolation and need. It is often associated with confusion and despair which, living in a desert, or a city in the middle of a desert, we should hopefully be able to understand. Fertile ground is rich with potential

and sustenance. It is a place where you could provide for your family and thrive, and therefore a place where a society can grow and abound.

But the wilderness is a place hostile to life. You can't grow food, there is no water, most animals can't survive in it, and therefore, it can't house a thriving society. It has no boundaries or markers, it is an ocean of desolation as far as the eye can see. As such, the wilderness is a place that is easily exploitable by our enemy to cause division and distrust amongst the people of God, but it is equally a place where God can show Himself to be the sole source of our provision and sustenance.

This is fairly accurate for anyone who is newly saved, or anyone going through the process of deep repentance.

"A satisfied soul loathes the honeycomb, But to a hungry soul every bitter thing is sweet."

-Proverbs 27:7

As bad as our sin might be, at least it did provide a level of nourishment for us. I like how a recovering addict put it in their testimony:

"Drugs weren't my problem, they were my solution, when they were taken away from me then I had a problem."

No matter how bad the tyrant may be, the wilderness is actually worse and more threatening. This is why God's calling on His people is not merely to escape slavery, but to be nourished by Him.

"When an unclean spirit goes out of a man, he goes through dry places, seeking rest; and finding none, he says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' "And when he comes, he finds it swept and put in order. "Then he goes and takes with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter and dwell there; and the last state of that man is worse than the first."

-Luke 11:24-26

Leadership

"Where there is no revelation, the people cast off restraint; But happy is he who keeps the law."

-Proverbs 29:18

Before we get into the main topic of this passage I would like to point out another important take away, the importance of leadership. While this passage has a much deeper and more nuanced importance to it, one way to interpret it is that under poor leadership, even an oasis can be turned into a wilderness, but under good leadership even the desert can bloom.

Egypt became one of the most powerful nations on earth through their immense natural resources, and the miraculous deliverance that God provided through Joseph. But all this good was squandered through the foolish leadership of just a handful of brutal and totalitarian Pharaoh's, culminating in the ten plagues of Egypt.

Once again, though this story is a unique, miraculous event, the larger point remains, under bad leadership, even what is good can be made bitter. But the reverse is also true. Even in the wilderness, the Israelites were provided for through the good leadership that God appointed, who were uniquely submissive to Him.

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

-Exodus 15:27

This passage seems a bit strange, but what God symbolized here is His ultimate provision for the people. The twelve wells represent the twelve tribes of Israel, each having their own source of provision, the seventy palms represent the leadership that God would establish. A tree is a picture of stability and strength, providing shade, and even sustenance for their people (these would most likely be date palms which are very common and important in the Middle East). But later, Moses will appoint 70 elders to ascend Mount Sinai and see God in Exodus 24. This became the basis for the "Sanhedrin", the Jewish governing body that was made up of seventy men.

In our modern world we tend to blame all problems of scarcity on the greed of the western world, but the problem is not greed, but leadership. Some of the most nutrient rich places on earth are under the worst management and therefore are places of extreme poverty. Oftentimes it is mismanagement that creates a slew of problems. This is even true for our own lives. It is easy to blame our own failures and shortcomings on others, but the one main fact that separates the truly successful from the unsuccessful is this one truth, it is less about the resources and more about the management.

I was recently listening to an interview of the famous singer Ed Sheeran talking about his success. Most people think that he must have had some sort of leg up through a connection, or maybe he was simply born with obscene levels of unearned talent. In the

interview he debunks all of these claims and even plays a recording of himself when he was younger learning to sing. Suffice it to say, he was not born with his current level of talent, this original tape sounds about as tone deaf as I am.

Now I am not saying that anyone could become as talented as Ed Sheeran, but that he recognized the same truth that is present in this passage, that success in life is more about leadership than it is about circumstances.

Deliverance and Dependence

“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.”

-Exodus 15:21

Now to the main topic of the passage. The obvious question that we could ask is why God has His people go through the wilderness in the first place. Since He is all powerful, why not simply teleport the nation to the Promised Land, why cause them to go through a desolate place devoid of water and food? The answer is dependency. God’s main purpose in our lives is to draw us to Himself, not necessarily to bless all of our physical needs. And the main temptation of man is to see God as mainly a resource for our provision and not as the source of all our needs.

This confusing idea is the reason why God will often leave His people in distress. Even the Apostle Paul struggles with this when he is afflicted by some sort of “thorn in the flesh”. After praying three times that God might remove this trial, He responds like this:

“And He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

-2 Corinthians 12:9-10

What Paul comes to realize is that God was actually giving him something greater than a miracle of healing, He was giving him the grace necessary to be sustained within his trial. This might not sound like a beautiful miracle, but it was exactly what Paul needed. This is also what we need. As amazing as physical miracles can be, and as wonderful as prosperity can be, we need to understand our dependency on God and our need for Him. These chapters of Exodus in the wilderness are meant to teach us this all important lesson:

“So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD.”

-Deuteronomy 8:3

This is also why this passage ends with God telling His people that He won't plague them if they heed His commands. It isn't just that God Himself is the source of our satisfaction and life, but when we are told that man “lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD.” This means that we are protected and preserved in the commands of God, and not in the pursuit of our own self-will.

Vaneetha Risner is a Christian who has undergone immense suffering in her life due to getting polio at a young age. After years of praying for deliverance, she never received it. After a while she grew scornful and bitter until one day a mentor of hers told her she was scorning the sustaining grace of God:

“Scornful of grace. Exactly. I've often been guilty of that. In waiting for the huge, monumental deliverance—the kind where I can put my issue to bed and never have to pray about it again—I've overlooked the grace that keeps drawing me to him. The prayers that may appear unanswered, but actually are fulfilled in ways that keep me dependent, tethered, needy.”

-Vaneetha Risner - “The Scars That Have Shaped Me”

As amazing as the Red Sea crossing was, the miracle of provision in the wilderness is actually the superior one. The deliverance from slavery was good, but to develop His people, God needed them to understand their need for Him.

Nourishment

“Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ.”

-1 Corinthians 10:1-4

This is how we are supposed to understand the next couple chapters. God providing the Israelites with physical nourishment is a metaphor for the nourishment of our souls. Egypt, as a picture of the flesh, represents the relationship that a person has with their

flesh. When we begin our lives, all we know is how to be nourished in our flesh. We find our fulfillment, our satisfaction, our meaning, and our identity all within the creation.

And like the Israelites, in the beginning, this relationship with our flesh and the world begins sweet. We are filled and relatively satisfied which is why we don't pursue God. Over time though, what once fulfilled us, begins to turn bitter. This is the primary way we are to interpret this symbol. The water of the Nile is turned to blood because that's what sin does. This symbol is then repeated throughout Scripture. Take this Proverb about the adulterous woman:

"For the lips of an immoral woman drip honey, And her mouth is smoother than oil; But in the end she is bitter as wormwood, Sharp as a two-edged sword. Her feet go down to death, Her steps lay hold of hell."

-Proverbs 5:3-5

The temptation of an immoral woman is the sensual pleasure that she represents. But once the "sweetness" of her presence wears off, all one would be left with is bitter regret. This same symbol shows up in the book of Revelation in a more clear way:

"Then the third angel sounded: And a great star fell from heaven, burning like a torch, and it fell on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water. The name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters became wormwood, and many men died from the water, because it was made bitter."

-Revelation 8:10-11

This passage is a clear inversion of Exodus 15. Instead of God providing a tree to "sweeten" the waters, He instead brings down a "star" from heaven to make the sweet waters bitter. The relationship with sin is always in this pattern. It begins sweet, but then turns bitter. What once nourished us begins to degrade and kill us because we were created to be satisfied by God Himself.

"The backslider in heart will be filled with his own ways, But a good man will be satisfied from above."

-Proverbs 14:14

However, when Israel comes to the waters of God, they are, at first bitter, why is that? When we come to God, He appears to us as something bitter. We know that to come to God we must die to ourselves, we must give up our autonomy and much of our liberty. It isn't enough to scorn our sin, we have to submit ourselves fully to God and seek Him above all else. All this sacrifice seems bitter and that is why we resist God.

But in a strange twist within the story, God has Moses throw a tree into the waters and they are made clean and sweet. What is happening here? As with most Biblical symbolism, it is layered and complex, but to the best of my understanding, the tree here is a call back to the tree of life in the Garden of Eden.

“And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, was the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, each tree yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.”

-Revelation 22:1-2

The river that John sees in his vision seems to be the same one that the prophet Ezekiel sees in a similar vision at the end of his book:

“He said to me, “Son of man, have you seen this?” Then he brought me and returned me to the bank of the river. When I returned, there, along the bank of the river, were very many trees on one side and the other. Then he said to me: “This water flows toward the eastern region, goes down into the valley, and enters the sea. When it reaches the sea, its waters are healed.”

-Ezekiel 47:6-8

This is where the seeming complexity of Biblical symbolism can actually make things more clear. In Ezekiel it is the river that heals the waters, but in Revelation it is the tree of life that is shown to heal the nations, which seems to fit the story of Exodus more clearly. This is where Biblical literalism can actually destroy our understanding. It's not that the waters of Mara weren't literally healed by a tree, nor that the vision of Ezekiel or John aren't going to be literally fulfilled, but the more important question is always, what do these symbols mean?

A tree is a living structure that fills the earth and provides for all our needs. Its roots are beneath the earth, the branches are in heaven, and the structure is upon the earth. It provides shade, wood, covering from its leaves, and possibly fruit to fill and nourish us. This is why the symbol of eternal life in the garden is in the form of the tree, it is perfect union and harmony that brings us to God. This is also why the tree of knowledge of good and evil is also a tree. It is a false structure, an attempt for mankind to bring about our own harmony through our own will and dominance. Once again, the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil begins sweet, but ends in bitterness and death.

Through this miracle, God is showing His people a strange mystery that will be fulfilled in the future. Christ *is* the tree of life and the river of Ezekiel. This is why Jesus associates Himself with waters in John 4 and 7, and why He associates Himself with a tree in John 15. It is also why Paul tells us that Christ was killed upon a tree in Galatians 3.

Christ is the bridge, He is the One who descended into the grave, like the roots of the tree, lived His life upon the earth, and then ascended into heaven. And from His sacrifice we have the bitter waters made sweet. Through the bitterness of His death, His church can be nourished and set free by Him. This is why Christ drinks bitter gall before He dies:

“After this, Jesus, knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the Scripture might be fulfilled, said, “I thirst!” Now a vessel full of sour wine was sitting there; and they filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on hyssop, and put it to His mouth.”

-John 19:28-29

Christ drank of the bitterness of death and the grave. That although He never sinned, He drank the fullness of the consequences of our sin and rebellion against God. And from the bitterness of death, came life:

“But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out.”

-John 19:34

This is an inversion of Egypt. God curses the water of the Nile, the water that gave life to the Egyptians, to be blood, a symbol of death. Christ is crucified, and from His wound we have, first blood, symbolizing His death, but then water, signifying the life that He provides for us. This is why the imagery of the Lord's supper can seem so confusing:

“Then Jesus said to them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. “Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. “For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed. “He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him.”

-John 6:53-56

All symbolism comes crashing together in the person of Christ. He is the manna in the desert, the river that heals the waters, the tree of life, and what was forbidden to man after the fall, fruit from the tree of life that would allow us to live forever, is offered

through the cross of Christ. To eat and drink of His sacrifice is to eat and drink that nourishment of the soul that leads to eternal life. Christ fills all things, and in so doing transforms the bitterness of this life into glory.

Just as sin can take even the most profound pleasure and turn it into slavery and death, so Christ can take the most bitter things of this world and turn them into pleasure and eternal glory. Through the deliverance of God, He transforms the bitterness of Israel's slavery into the sweetness of God's salvation and provision. In the same way, any trial or struggle that we go through can draw us closer to God and be transformed into eternal glory.

Through the obedience of Christ, He can take the bitterness of the Law that condemns and shames all of us, and turn it into the sweetness of our deliverance.

“And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it.”

-Colossians 2:13-15

The bitter condemnation of the Law, has now become the sweetness of obedience and intimacy with God. Even the presence of God has been transformed by the cross. The presence of God that the Israelites experience is threatening and scary. In fact, when God begins to speak to the people of Israel they ask Him to stop because of how intimidating He is. But, through the mediation of Moses, who foreshadows the greater mediation of Christ, the people of God can enter into a relationship with God and learn to long for His presence and goodness. In the same way, the modern Christian has learned to taste the sweetness of God and His love. To be satisfied, not with our own way, but with the presence of God. And in that sweetness to find freedom and liberty.

I wanted to end this study with a look at a story in the gospel of John that brings all of this together:

“Now Jacob's well was there. Jesus therefore, being wearied from His journey, sat thus by the well. It was about the sixth hour. A woman of Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, “Give Me a drink.” For His disciples had gone away into the city to buy food. Then the woman of Samaria said to Him, “How is it that You, being a Jew, ask a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?” For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans. Jesus answered and said to her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you,

'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water." The woman said to Him, "Sir, You have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep. Where then do You get that living water? "Are You greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well, and drank from it himself, as well as his sons and his livestock?" Jesus answered and said to her, "Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, "but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life." The woman said to Him, "Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw." Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come here." The woman answered and said, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You have well said, 'I have no husband,' "for you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband; in that you spoke truly."

-John 4:7-18

The well in this story is this same symbol, the place where we seek our satisfaction. This woman sought satisfaction in her sexuality, accumulating numerous husbands and a current lover. But in all of these relationships, she has not found what she was looking for, which is why she kept returning to the well. Meaning that since she hasn't found what she was looking for in her relationships, she assumed that the problem was with the man she was with, and so she swapped husbands always looking for ultimate satisfaction.

This is how sin becomes bitter. The longing that we are after, slowly becomes bitter in its failure to satisfy us. And just like salt water, instead of refreshing us, it only makes us thirsty for more. But Christ comes and tells her that He shows her that He is the water of life, He is the One that she was looking for, though she didn't know it. And through this conversation, that began in bitterness and contention, she found the sweetness of salvation, the living water that would satisfy her soul. Not through a technique offered by Christ, nor through knowledge, but through a relationship with Him, she found satisfaction and we are told:

"The woman then left her waterpot, went her way into the city, and said to the men, "Come, see a Man who told me all things that I ever did. Could this be the Christ?"

-John 4:28-29

She leaves her waterpot and tells people of Christ and His ministry. She has now found her worth and her satisfaction in a relationship with Jesus. This is what nourishes her soul and provides freedom from her past. This then transforms the course of her life. In her self-will she pursued what seemed sweet but turned out to be bitter, but in the grace

of God she found that the service of God that she ignored and had seemed bitter, was actually sweet.

“Ye cannot in your present state understand eternity... But ye can get some likeness of it if ye say that both good and evil, when they are full grown, become retrospective... That is what mortals misunderstand. They say of some temporal suffering, ‘No future bliss can make up for it,’ not knowing that Heaven, once attained, will work backwards and turn even that agony into a glory. And of some sinful pleasure they say ‘Let me but have this and I’ll take the consequences’: little dreaming how damnation will spread back and back into their past and contaminate the pleasure of the sin... That is why, at the end of all things... the Blessed will say, ‘We have never lived anywhere except in Heaven,’ and the Lost, ‘We were always in Hell.’”

-C.S. Lewis - “The Great Divorce”