

Proving and Provision at Marah

Exodus 15:22-27

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Three days from Moses' song to the murmuring of sedition. How shocking this is in the light of Israel's recent history. They witnessed the discriminating plagues in Egypt. They were delivered from slave labor with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, passing through the Red Sea on dry ground. As they reached the other side, they turned just in time to see the walls of water collapse, crushing Pharaoh's army. The whole assembly erupted with shouts of great joy; they sang the song of Moses and the women danced Miriam's dance. Yet three days later, the murmuring of rebellion. What could have produced such a failure of trust?

We have before us an account of God's wilderness proving (in the Old English sense of "testing"). And what kind of trial was it? No doubt it was a physical trial. Three days dwindled Israel's water supply, and without water nothing can live. You can imagine how each day, as the jugs got a little emptier, the song of Moses got a little quieter, and Miriam's dance and timbrel got a little slower, until no more song, no more dance, only the murmuring of rebellion. No doubt it was also an emotional trial. As the Israelites saw water from afar, an oasis in a vast desert wasteland, you can imagine their excitement. They ran to it, kneeling down to drink, expecting it to taste so refreshing and sweet. But as they drank the water--bitterness! Bitterness not only because of the taste, but

because it was the exact opposite of the sweetness they expected.

But more than a physical trial, more than an emotional trial, the bitter water of Marah represented a spiritual trial that challenged the very heart of God's promise to Israel. At the beginning of the book of Exodus, God heard the groaning of his people and promised to deliver them on account of the covenant he made with their fathers. And from what did God promised to deliver them? Exodus 1:14 tells us: the Egyptians made the lives of the Israelites bitter with hard labor. And as the Israelites left Egypt, they ate the bitter herbs in remembrance of the bitterness of Egypt (Ex. 12:8). Egypt was characterized by bitterness. God's promise to deliver Israel from Egypt was a promise to deliver them from bitterness. And now, after the Red Sea redemption, Israel finds herself drinking from the bitter waters. Do you see the trial? Bitterness in Egypt, bitterness in the wilderness: has God really done anything at all? Beyond physical need, beyond emotional frustration, this trial reaches down to the very depths of faith in the God of Israel.

As the first narrative on the other side of the Red Sea redemption, this text teaches us something important about the character of the wilderness. The wilderness is a place of trial, where the promise of God seems to have come to naught. Though she has been redeemed through the Red Sea, though she has the presence of God in the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night, Israel does not yet have the fullness of her inheritance. The wilderness is Israel's already/not yet experience, her semi-realized eschatology. Though definitively delivered, she awaits the consummate rest of the promised land. She has not yet crossed the border into the land flowing with milk and honey. And in the meantime, Israel is confronted with proving trials which seem to call into question the truthfulness of God's promises.

And what did Israel do? She became bitter. The water was bitter and Israel became bitter. The bitter water acted like a catalyst for the bitterness of Israel's soul. Israel tasted not just the bitterness of the waters but the bitterness of forsaking the Lord (Jer. 2:19). God's people, on the other side of their salvation, have become bitter.

You must grasp this because Israel's wilderness sojourn is your wilder-

ness sojourn. Speaking of Israel's wilderness journey, Paul writes, "Now these things happened to them as types, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come" (1 Cor. 10:11). Israel's wilderness sojourn is a type (often poorly translated in 1 Cor. 10 as "example") of the church's heavenly journey. You are the last, the heavenly, the eschatological wilderness community. You are the wilderness community upon whom the ends of the ages have come. You are not between redemption from Egypt and the land of Canaan, but between the realities to which they point. You are between the redemption from the bondage of sin and the new Jerusalem. You have been redeemed from sin, you have the down payment of the Spirit, but you do not yet have the fullness of your inheritance. You have not yet come to the land flowing with milk and honey. Rather, you have proving trials which appear to invalidate God's promise. You find yourself in this life before the Lord returns in a period of trial, in a wilderness where it seems that the promise of God has come to naught and you are tempted to be bitter. Israel's story is your story.

But our text is not only an account of God's wilderness proving, but also of his wilderness provision. God provides a tree to heal the bitterness of the waters. At this point let me encourage you not to make too facile of a jump from the tree to the cross, for if you do you will miss something very significant about our text as well as an answer to a source-critical objection often lodged against it. Many commentators want to reject the unity of our text, assigning verse 25a to one source and verses 25b-26 to another. They cannot see how the verse on throwing the tree into the water relates to the verse on the statute and the regulation to keep all God's commandments. Therefore, they say that the verses came from two different authors and were put together at a time well after Israel's exile.

What I want you to see is that there is an essential unity between the throwing of the tree into the water (v. 25a) and the statute and regulation to keep all God's commandments (vv. 25b-26, which I will hereafter refer to as the Marah statute). What is implicitly pictured in God showing Moses the tree and Moses throwing the tree in the waters is explicitly stated in the Marah statute in the following verses. Both implicitly and explicitly, what is being revealed to us is the requirement for the Israelites' obedience to receive blessing.

God shows Moses a tree. The word translated "show" is a word which means to instruct.¹ It is the word from which we get Torah. When the passage says that God showed Moses a tree, what we have is God instructing Moses concerning a tree. We could translate the verse, "God gave Torah to Moses." Even if the translation of "showed" is preferred, God clearly showed Moses the tree to tell Moses what to do with it. Moses then followed God's instruction by throwing the tree into the water and the water became sweet. Note the progression: God gave Moses instruction, Moses followed God's instruction, and the result was healing and sweetness. The whole focus of what happens at Marah is on the effect of obedience to God's word. When Moses follows God's instruction, the result is sweetness. The sign indicates the blessing and healing that comes from being obedient to God's commands.

This, then, is what is explicitly stated in verses 25b-26. The statute conveys the exact same message: if you are obedient to God's commands, God will be your healer. Note here the relationship of works to blessing. This is not evangelical obedience. This is "do this and live" obedience. If Israel is not obedient, God threatens them with the diseases of the Egyptians, the marks of divine curse. The statute hearkens back to the relationship of works to blessing in the garden. As the people are being led to Mt. Sinai where they will receive the yoke of the law and will themselves ratify the law covenant, they are already being prepared for the theocratic principle of inheritance. If the people want to retain the blessings of God, if the people want God to be their healer, they must follow his Torah.

Yet Israel's history in the wilderness is a sad testimony of their inability to keep the Marah statute. This is the generation that fell in the wilderness. They could not keep the commandments of God and God was not their healer. Even once a new generation entered the land, they failed to keep the commandments

¹ Most English versions translate verse 25 as "God showed him," because of their dependence on Brown-Driver-Briggs which lists one of the meanings of *yryh* as "to show," citing this text. But *yryh* in the Hiphil with the double accusative has the clear meaning "to instruct someone concerning something," so much so that many of the new dictionaries no longer list "to show" as a meaning. For an example, see *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, ed. D. J. A. Clines (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), vol. 4, p. 291-292. For other passages with the same grammatical construction as ours, where the meaning is clearly God instructing someone concerning something, see Psalms 27:11, 86:11 and 119:33.

of Yahweh and were cast out of the promised land in exile, a type of judgment.

Israel's failure points to the need for a new Israel, an Israel which can be obedient to the commandments of God if God is to be our healer. While the wilderness trial is a type of the Church, it is first and foremost a type of Christ. The obedience required of the Israelites to merit God's healing is fulfilled in Christ. He is the true Israel, "Out of Egypt I called my Son" (Mt. 2:15; Hos. 11:1). In Matthew 4 and Luke 4, it is Christ who passes the probation in the wilderness. This is a recapitulation of the temptation experiences of Adam and Israel. Where Adam and Israel failed, Christ prevailed.

The glory of the new covenant is that the Marah statute points not to what you must do, but what has been done for you. Christ is the one who gives earnest heed to the voice of the Lord, and does what is right in his sight, and gives ear to his commandments, and keeps all his statutes. Hence it is on account of the obedience of Christ that God is our healer.

Did not the Israelites already see this as they looked into the face of Moses and saw a covenant mediator who was obedient to God's command and healed the bitterness for the people? Yet this is the generation that perished in the wilderness, despite Moses' mediation. Despite Moses' obedience and intercession, the bitterness and rebellion of the people made God lay them low in the wilderness. Moses himself could not usher them into the Promised Land (which he himself did not enter). So just as Israel's failure points ahead in the history of redemption to a new Israel, Moses' failure points ahead in the history of redemption to a new Moses. This Savior is so glorious, he is so wonderful, that in his person the typology of Israel and Moses converge. Christ is the faithful covenant mediator who acts on behalf of the people by being obedient to all of God's commandments. He is the one who brings healing to the people. He does this by his resurrection. Christ is greater than Moses because Christ himself drank the bitter waters of Marah on the cross. And because death had no hold on him, he was raised into the new paradise. His resurrection now guarantees our access into the Promised Land.

What then of the tree? Perhaps you thought I was going to leave this out! God did not show Moses a rock, Moses did not put his staff in the water. The reference to the tree is not incidental. The tree is obviously the instrument of

healing. Does not the collocation of tree and healing immediately bring to mind Revelation 22, where in the new paradise there is the tree of life whose leaves are healing to the nations? That which was the future reward held out in the garden, that which is the final provision of the heavenly Jerusalem, is already intruding itself into the wilderness. The tree represents nothing less than the new order penetrating into the old. As Geerhardus Vos wrote, "The kingdom of God, what else is it but a new world of supernatural realities supplanting this natural world of sin." And access to this tree of life comes only via Calvary's tree. The sweetness of heaven, the new heavenly order, comes to us by the work of Christ. His obedience merits for us the eschatological reward of the tree of life. He drank the bitter waters on the cross, he endured the bitter wrath of God, he tasted the bitterness of death, that you might know the sweetness of the forgiveness of sins, the sweetness of sonship, the sweetness of communion with the Father. Christ has taken the bitterness out of your wilderness sojourn, because even now in your wilderness you have access to this tree of life, because of Jesus' tree.

Notice how our text end. God brought them to Elim in the wilderness. It is no doubt a picture of paradise: twelve springs of water and seventy date palms. Elim is the promise that the wilderness sojourn has an end. What gives the wilderness meaning and makes it bearable is its relationship to paradise. And as surely as God has brought Israel to Elim, he will bring his people to the promised land, the new paradise of God.

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