

Lesson 15 – “Bitter Waters Made Sweet” Exodus 15:22-27

*“Then Miriam, the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took the timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances. And Miriam answered them:
‘Sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously!
The horse and its rider He has thrown into the sea!’”
Exodus 15:20-21*

Miriam is referred to as the sister of Aaron, but we know, of course, that she was also the sister of Moses. She is given the title “prophetess.” At that time, women did not serve as what we know today as pastors, or priests, or teachers, but there were some serving in the capacity of prophetess. Deborah in the book of Judges was also a prophetess and a judge. And then we read about Anna in the gospel of Luke, another prophetess, who served in the temple and beheld Jesus when they brought Him there as an infant. These were all women who heard from God, and prophesied of Him; Miriam was one of them. She is mentioned in the book of Micah, where he says, *“For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, I redeemed you from the house of bondage; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron and Miriam.”* (Micah 6:4) Here, Miriam rises to the occasion as a leader of women and leads them (only the women) in a victory song of praise to the Lord. The timbrels they refer to here could also mean a type of tambourine. These were the musical instruments used by women in different types of ceremonies. On joyous occasions like this one, there was always dancing. We can only imagine the overwhelming sense of joy that swept over the people at this time. They were filled to overflowing, and they simply could not contain it. After all, God had delivered them from the hands of their oppressors, and He had saved their lives; He had saved the nation of Israel! So they sang and danced and celebrated!

Chapter 15, vs. 22 – 25a. The people were finally on the move. I’m sure by this time, they were probably glad to get as far away from the sea as possible; even if it was into the wilderness. One unforeseen problem they faced, however, was the lack of water. Three days without life giving water can seem like an eternity. So, what is their reaction? Do they go to the Lord in prayer, knowing Him as the God who had just parted the Red Sea for them, remembering that nothing was too difficult for Him, and that He would provide? No, they do not. They complain to Moses, once again placing all blame and responsibility on him for their circumstances. They found water, but it was bitter. If this was a test from God to see if they would be the people of faith He wanted them to be, they failed miserably. Maybe the bitter water was a reflection of God’s bitterness toward them.

Moses cries out to the Lord on behalf of the people. He places his faith in the Lord, as he would do many times, and pleads for the Lord to have mercy on them. In spite of their behavior, God answers his prayer and again makes a way for them. Did they deserve His mercy, no, but do we? *“If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself.”* 2 Timothy 2:13

The bitterness of the waters of Marah reminds us of the bitterness of the cross of Jesus. God made the waters sweet for the Israelites, just as Jesus made our lives sweeter by His supreme sacrifice on the cross. And not just for us, but for all who would accept Him as their Savior. God was willing and able to make the bitter waters sweet, just as He is willing and able to turn our most bitter moments into times of sweetness, when we place our hope and faith in Him. Maybe the best way to explain it is in the book of Isaiah where the prophet proclaims this:

“ The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me, because the Lord has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn, to console those who mourn in Zion, to give them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they may be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that He may be glorified.” Isaiah 61:1-3

Vss. 25b – 26. Moses, ever the faithful ambassador of God and example for the people, now reminds them of the importance of their obedience if they are to continue to be the recipients of God’s protection and well-being. Specifically, they had to obey His commandments and live by His statutes. In return, He assures them, as His people, that He will certainly never inflict upon them what He had done to the Egyptians by way of the plagues. He refers to Himself here as *“the Lord who heals you”* or, in other words, *“Jehovah Rapha.”*

*“Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits:
Who forgives all your iniquities,
Who heals all your diseases,
Who redeems your life from destruction,
Who crowns you with lovingkindness and tender mercies,
Who satisfies your mouth with good things,
So that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.”
Psalm 103:2-5*

Vs. 27. As they continue their journey, they come to Elim, a stark contrast to the desert, with wells of water and abundant palm trees. Whether they recognized it or not, this was just another sign of God’s lovingkindness and provision. In Marah they had experienced the disappointment of finding water that was bitter and not suitable for drinking. Now, at Elim, there was plenty of water for them to drink. God can always provide places of rest for us, even in the harshness of a wilderness. We may not be on a physical journey like the Israelites, but you could say that metaphorically, we are ... it’s a journey called life, and we’re just passing through. We don’t know what’s around the corner, anymore than the Israelites did, but God does. This world can sometimes be like a wilderness to us, too, dry and bitter. I believe God would have us be prepared, like the example of the Apostle Paul. Paul said in Philippians 4:12-13 that he had learned how to live under both easy and hard circumstances.

“Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”

This is a powerful and hard lesson for us as believers. Jesus said in John 16:33 that in this world we would have tribulation, but that we should take heart because He had overcome the world, and that’s why we can have peace ... because of Christ who strengthens us! Jesus defeated the enemy of our souls when He went to the cross. The blood he shed for us that day is so powerful that when we pray and plead it over our lives, over our loved ones, over our circumstances, the enemy has to back off because of what that blood represents – the victory of Christ on the cross over death! And that victory was for us!

*“Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”
Romans 8:37-39*

