

## **“When Bitter Turns Sweet” – Exodus 15:22-27**

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*[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, [www.welovethegospel.com](http://www.welovethegospel.com).]*

Take your Bible and let's meet in Exodus 15...

[New Series Starting Next Time]

What happens on the other side of the Red Sea? That's what we are going to explore a bit today, as Evan did last week. There are three stories that we find that prove to be significant and are called to mind frequently in the Bible from this point forward—the story of Marah (15:22-27), the story of Manna (16:1-36), and the story of Massah (17:1-7). Last Sunday, pastor Evan took us through the last of these—the story Massah—and today I would like for us to consider the first—the story of Marah. I know that at least one of our home groups (20s and 30s, Thursdays) has been studying Ruth lately, so the term “Marah” with look familiar. There is a thematic connection between this story and the opening chapter of Ruth, which you can probably already predict because of the name.

Let me catch you up. The people of God have been delivered from slavery in Egypt. They have recently crossed the Red Sea. When the waters grow calm and the worship songs die down, we find the people of Israel in the wilderness. The wilderness proves to be a trying time for them and almost immediately their praises give way to complaints. The three consecutive stories on the heels of the Red Sea all share this theme of grumbling or complaining (e.g., 15:24; 16:2; 17:3).<sup>1</sup>

So all of these stories in some way address the dangers of becoming complainers, which I'm sure applies to no one in this room, but humor me...No, we all struggle here, in our own ways. So we need to take texts like these to heart. To do that, we must do the most important thing, get the text of Scripture in our minds. If you only hear and focus at one moment today, now is the time. Follow along as I read, beginning in verse 22 of chapter 15. This is God's Word...

*“Then Moses made Israel set out from the Red Sea, and they went into the wilderness of Shur. They went three days in the wilderness and found no water. <sup>23</sup> When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter; therefore it was named Marah. <sup>24</sup> And the people grumbled against Moses, saying, ‘What shall we drink?’ <sup>25</sup> And he cried to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a log, and he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet. There the LORD made for them a statute and a rule, and there he tested them, <sup>26</sup> saying, ‘If you will diligently listen to the voice of the LORD your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give ear to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, your healer.’*

*<sup>27</sup> Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees, and they encamped there by the water.” (Exodus 15:22-27)*

Now then, one of the things I love about the stories of the Old Testament is that often (though certainly not always) they can provide us with patterns of the Christian experience. The big picture experience of Israel was one of slavery, trusting in a lamb, crossing from death to life, singing the song of redemption, embarking on a long pilgrimage where they are called to trust and obey, and finally reaching the Promised Land. Friends, this is the same trajectory for God's people today. This is the Christian experience.<sup>2</sup>

Paul said something similar to the Corinthians. In commenting on one of the wilderness accounts of Israel's grumbling, he writes, "Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come" (1 Corinthians 10:11). Israel's experience, then, was, at least in part, for our benefit. What happened to them is instructive for us.<sup>3</sup> We too were in bondage. We too have passed through the waters of judgment by grace and through faith in a slaughtered Lamb. And we too find ourselves in a wilderness, the wilderness of life between the first and second comings of Christ, inching ever closer toward the promises of God. Our salvation in Christ is secure, but the journey is not over. The Christian life, in other words, is a pilgrimage, a wilderness journey to a Promised Land. The pattern we see in Exodus is the one that is characteristic of our own lives.

That wilderness journey is important. The time between the initial experience of deliverance and the final deliverance into a paradise flowing with milk and honey is not always easy. Wildernesses can be brutal places. But while God could have brought the Israelites into the Promised Land much faster and He could bring us into eternal life immediately after our conversion, in both cases He chooses another route, the wilderness route. He doesn't seem to be a God of shortcuts, does He? But He always has His reasons, complaints notwithstanding. One commentator, named John Mackay, offers some helpful remarks:

"...it is God's normal way of working that entering into glory does not immediately follow salvation. Rather there is a time of preparation to make his people ready for the inheritance he will bestow on them. That was the method he followed in the case of the Israelites. Free they indeed were from the hand of Egyptian control, but they had still much to learn. For one thing their faith was still very weak, and it would take time for their trust in the LORD to develop so that they would be able to face every set of circumstances without hesitation. They were therefore led into times of difficulty and testing so that their spiritual faculties might be developed through use. It was one thing to sing the praises of their Deliverer, and quite another to live out that faith when confronted with the problems of ordinary living. Overcoming the latter challenge would bring them to a clearer understanding of themselves and of what it meant to have faith in the LORD."<sup>4</sup>

Do you see? I believe it was Matthew Henry who first said that Moses spent forty years in Egypt learning to be something, forty years in Midian learning to be nothing, and forty years in the wilderness leading the people of Israel proving that God was everything (or something to that effect). God uses the wilderness to prepare His people for the Promised Land of Canaan. The wilderness is meant for their good. It's their training ground. It's the university for God's people. Charles Spurgeon called it "the Oxford and Cambridge for God's students," where they acquire a degree in faith "before they enter into the Promised Land."<sup>5</sup> And like most schools, "Wilderness University" has some tests along the way.<sup>6</sup>

But the value of the wilderness is that it can teach us to rest entirely in the Lord by stripping us of our self-confidence and self-sufficiency. Through trials God builds in us trust. "All our problems and persecutions are meant to teach us to depend on God alone, to have absolute confidence in His faithfulness."<sup>7</sup> The theological term for this is sanctification, that long and hard process of being conformed to the holiness of God. Israel made a decisive break with Egypt. God took the people out of Egypt but now God was working to get Egypt out of them. That's sanctification. That's what God is working on in us after we become believers until He calls us home. We can learn lessons in the Marahs of life (where the water is bitter) and lessons in Elims of life (where the water is abundant), but we learn more about faith in Marah than we do in Elim. And when we realize this perhaps we may find it easier to count it joy when we face trials of many kinds (James 1:2). God doesn't waste them. He works them for our good.

What I would like to do with the remainder of our time is consider several ways that Israel's wilderness experience connects to the wilderness of life we find ourselves traveling through. So here's the first lessons...

**In the Wilderness of Life...**  
*Yesterday's Salvation Is Easy to Forget*

Three days have passed since the Israelites were singing praises and dancing (yes, dancing, Baptists! Close your eyes, if you must, but don't cross that out of your Bible) on the coast of the Red Sea and that's all it took for the people of God to start complaining. Three days. They come to Moses and whine, "Moses, we're thirsty." My kids used to do this thing every night when it was time for bed. We would go through the usual routines. They climb in bed. And then, almost without fail, one kid will get up, come to mom and dad, and say, "I'm thirsty." They have all this time to drink before bed, but they always seem to wait until after they get in bed to get thirsty. Then the next kid gets up. And the cycle continues until they finally give up and go to bed. In many cases, they are not really thirsty, they're just looking for an excuse to get out of bed. If we tell them to go back to bed, knowing that they have had plenty to drink, the whining begins. "But I'm so thirsty. I'm going to die!" "No you're not. Goodnight."

But in the case of the Israelites, they are legitimately thirsty. The wilderness is not very hospitable because the resources can be scarce, particularly for a group this size. Three days is a long time to travel with limited or no water supply. And then, can you imagine, you're on the verge of dehydration when you finally spot some water on the horizon, in the land of Marah, you dip your hands into that supply, cup the fluid to your mouth, only to spew it out a millisecond. "Yuck!" It's disgusting. It's bitter. Hence the name of the place—"Marah"—which means "bitterness." Remember Ruth? Naomi, after losing her whole family, is forced to return home to Bethlehem. The people hardly recognize her. "*Is this Naomi?*", they ask. To which, she replies, "*Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me*" (Ruth 1:19-20). So Naomi and this place share a name because they both were associated with bitterness.

Having tasted the waters of Marah, the people become bitter (or, more accurately, the bitterness of the people begins to come out). Their disposition is shaped by their present experience more than by what they have been taught about God. They're not walking by faith, but by sight. That's easy to do in the wilderness because, in the wilderness, yesterday's salvation is easy to forget. It's curious that no one is talking about what happened just a few days ago. There's a pillar of fire and cloud leading them, but no one among the Israelites is crying out to the Lord, remembering that He has not failed them yet. No one remembers that the last time they were in a dire situation, God made a way. They have seen that He has the power over creation and even water specifically. Yet there's no faith. Only forgetfulness (cf. Psalm 106:7).

In some ways the people of Israel look a bit like the Pharaoh. God does amazing things before them. They respond well for short time, only to let those lessons slip out of memory and resort back to their old way of thinking. As one writer put it, "The kind of forgetfulness of God's mighty deeds that so characterized Pharaoh, the anti-God, anti-Christ figure in the whole story, now seems to characterize God's own covenant people themselves." And we can shake our heads and think, "how could they?", but we have to remember what Paul said—these things happened as examples for us. "In other words, as we read Israel's story we are looking in the mirror."<sup>8</sup> We are seeing what we do.

Do we not sing of God's unending love every Sunday only to lose that perspective and live in such a way that calls that love into question three days later (maybe even three hours later), calling out "Marah, my life is bitter!" to all who will listen?<sup>9</sup> In the wilderness of life, yesterday's salvation is easy to forget. But never without consequence...

**In the Wilderness of Life...**  
***We Grumble Because We Forget***

At the first sign of trouble, the people bend their leader's ear with complaint. "This whole thing was your idea, Moses, so what are you going to do about our water problem?" Doesn't it sound childish? I read a comment on something once that I recorded for posterity, which went like this:

“People who moan really annoy me. People who go on about their petty problems or the failings of the government or the state of the roads or the behavior of young people—or old people. Don’t they realize how privileged they are? It really annoys me. The worst are those people who moan about people who moan.”

Now, obviously, the writer was being intentionally ironic. “As I grumble about grumblers, I turn out to be the biggest grumbler of all.”<sup>10</sup> Yet we so often consider our own complaining as somehow justified. Our complaints, we reason, are clearly legitimate because, well, you know, we’re right (!) and that person shouldn’t act like that. We’re not grumbling, we’re just offering constructive criticism. “We make ourselves the exception,” writes Tim Chester, “but the reality is that most of us grumble and some of us grumble most of the time.”<sup>11</sup>

We live in a culture that is all about instant gratification and so the temptations to complain are legion. But what does that say about us when we have a complaining spirit? The whining that is characteristic of children signifies their immaturity (trust me, I could tell you stories!). Is it not reasonable to assume that someone who is known for their constant complaining does so because of a spiritual immaturity. We could say more about what grumbling and complaining reveals about us, but, for now, we’ll just note that complainers are forgetters. Many who are complainers are complainers because their immature in their faith. They too easily forget who God is, what He has done, and what He has promised, so they resort to grumbling. Can you relate? Here’s the next lesson...

### **In the Wilderness of Life...**

#### ***The Way Forward Requires Looking Back***

I want you to notice something significant from earlier in the chapter. The people were singing a song of deliverance to the Lord—first the song of Moses and then Miriam leads the worship. When I read those songs it reminds me that we never move on from God’s saving work. The first song breaks up into two sections. The first section is looking back to the deliverance that God has provided, and the second section looks forward to the future in hope. But here’s the thing to notice—looking back helps them to look forward in faith. The song is teaching them that the same God who saved them will save them still. The One who is leading them in the wilderness will one day bring them to the destination He has promised. Looking back helps them to look forward in faith.

But isn’t it easy for us to forget to look back at God’s faithfulness? Isn’t it easy for us to sing Israel’s song of deliverance, listen to the sermons on Sunday morning, repeat the truths in Sunday School, only to forget the lessons on Monday morning? How easily we forget that God did not spare His Son for us and then find ourselves living as though God will abandon us to our wilderness rut. “Take your eyes off the cross and today’s crises will easily eclipse every one of God’s past kindnesses to you.”<sup>12</sup> The way forward for Israel is for them to look back at what God has done. The same is true for us. We move forward in faith only if we look back and remember the cross. We never graduate from the Gospel.

One of the Bible reading plans we have used at the church is based off of the one that Robert Murray M’Cheyne put together for his Scottish congregation in the nineteenth century. M’Cheyne was known for his disciplined daily devotions, what people today often call “quiet times.” He didn’t see these times as storing up grace for distant future struggles because, as he said, “manna will corrupt if laid by.” Instead, he said, “I have a daily devotional time early in the morning every day, I’m in the word, I’m calling out on God, not to store up manna for the day ahead but rather to train the eye, to give the eye a habit of looking in a particular direction that will last all the day long.”

It seems to me that this is one of the lessons we learn from the song of Exodus 15. We have to train the eye to look back at God’s deliverance. As one preacher, David Strain, put it,

“We must train our eyes never to wander from the cross, to give our eye the habit of constantly looking back to God’s mighty deliverance lest today’s troubles overwhelm us. If you keep your eyes on Jesus, on Calvary, on God’s great redemption, you will never begin to grumble or give plausibility to your complaint that God is insufficient for today’s trials. ‘He who gave His own Son, how will He not also along with Him graciously give us all things?’ [Romans 8:32] You think He will withhold mercy for today’s trails, grace to sustain you in today’s troubles if He has already gone so far as to give His own Son to Calvary for you?”<sup>13</sup>

If we keep training our eyes to look at the Cross, then we won’t be marked by forgetfulness and grumbling like Israel was, and instead we will act like Moses does in our text. Look again at verse 25—“*And [Moses] cried to the LORD*” and the LORD showed him what to do. He doesn’t retaliate against the Israelite complaints with his own list of complaints against them (though he could have). He doesn’t despair. He doesn’t panic. He turns to God. He prays. He confidently rests in God’s providence. And God makes a way. That’s what faith looks like. It encounters a challenge and instead of forgetting God in bitter complaint, it turns to God. Did you notice that Moses accomplished more through the simple prayer of faith than the nation of Israel accomplished through all of their complaining? How much does all your complaining fix? Be honest. Maybe you need a new strategy. May I suggest the one that Paul gives to the Philippians?

*“do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”* (Philippians 4:6-7)

That’s what we see in Moses. He handles a difficult crisis in a spiritually mature way. He shows us that when we encounter a bitter situation it need not make us bitter people. He took the trouble to God, and he obeyed the Word of God. And God in turn makes a way. Verse 25 says, “*the LORD showed him a log, and he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet.*” Presumably, God gave Moses some indication that he was supposed to throw that log in the water and Moses obeyed. This leads to the next lesson...

### **In the Wilderness of Life... *Obedience Can Make the Bitter Sweet***

There’s a play on words in the Hebrew that is related to this point. The verb translated “*showed*” in verse 25 is a word that comes from the same root as the word for “Torah,” which is used for God’s law, teaching, or instruction. So there is a kind of an object lesson at work. God “showed” Moses a log and tells him what to do with it, Moses obeys, and the bitter water turns sweet. What a miracle! And perhaps the even greater miracle is not what He did to the water, but the fact that He did it for this hoard of ingrates and malcontents called Israel. As Calvin once commented, “Herein shone forth the inestimable mercy of God, who deigned to change the nature of the water for the purpose of supplying such wicked, and rebellious, and ungrateful men.”<sup>14</sup> Talk about amazing grace! That’s what this is. And I know something about such grace from personal experience. A wretch like me has lots of experience with this kind of grace.

And then in the second half of verse 25 and verse 26 we see God giving instructions to Israel concerning obedience.

*“There the LORD made for them a statute and a rule, and there he tested them, <sup>26</sup> saying, ‘If you will diligently listen to the voice of the LORD your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give ear to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, your healer.’”* (Exodus 15:25b-26)

There are several synonyms for Torah in these verses—God’s statute, His rule, His voice, His commandments. God promises that if the people obey His instruction, they will not experience the fate of the Egyptians because the Lord is “*your healer*.” When they obey in faith, they will find God to be the God who heals them just as He healed the bitter water.<sup>15</sup> The word for healing has to do with soundness or wellness, whether that be physical or spiritual.<sup>16</sup> He is the God, as the Psalmist says, “*who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases*” (Psalm 103:3), activities connected to Jesus in the New Testament.<sup>17</sup>

Of course, you need to be careful here. This is not a blank check to us that God will heal all our sickness and trouble, if we just have enough faith. You know the hatred I have for the prosperity gospel, which is no gospel at all. We are not the Israelites wandering through the wilderness. This mini-covenant is not made with us, but with them.

Yet our God still expects obedience from the ones He saves.<sup>18</sup> And those who walk by obedient faith experience peace and blessing. They may not experience deliverance *from* every struggle, but they will experience deliverance *through* them. They may walk through the valley of the shadow of death, but even there they find God has prepared a table in the midst of their enemies (Psalm 23:4-5). And they will still find God to be Yahweh-Rophe, “the God who heals.” Some of that healing comes in this life and some through the resurrection in the next. But even in this life, He supplies grace for our time of need as we trust Him and faithfully keep His Word. That grace may come through a miracle that turns a bitter situation into something sweet (like He did in healing the waters of Marah) or by Him offering some other providence to supply our need (like He did by leading them to the waters of Elim). However it happens, He has promised to provide us with “*everything we need for life and godliness*” (2 Peter 1:3). His grace will be sufficient, and this leads us to the final truth...

### **In the Wilderness of Life...**

#### ***God’s Grace Will Always Match Our Need***

Look again at the last verse of the chapter.

*“Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees, and they encamped there by the water.”* (Exodus 15:27)

There are a couple of lessons to learn from this verse. The first one is that it shows us that the Israelites were on the verge of coming to a lush oasis as they were complaining to Moses. God was in fact *already* leading them to abundant provisions. He was already working for their good. And right before they experience that firsthand, they throw their hands up in despair at Marah and, were it not for God’s grace to complainers, they could have missed out on those provisions all together. They were so close to Elim when they almost gave up. How often do we lose faith when we are right on the verge of God’s provisions? We may never know. (God have mercy on us.)

But the second lesson relates to these numbers. Jewish literature loves to use numbers to teach lessons. There may have been literally twelve springs and seventy palms, but these numbers clearly meant to convey a theological lesson. These are numbers that express fullness or completeness of the blessing they find at Elim. Twelve springs are mentioned, and this makes one spring for each of the twelve tribes of Israel. And there are seventy palm trees, which correspond to the seventy elders of Israel.<sup>19</sup> This is way of saying there was plenty for everyone. God’s blessing was abundant. God’s grace matched their need. God’s grace will always match our true needs precisely.

Unfortunately, this was a lesson that this generation of Israelites, for the most part, never seemed to learn. Time and time again, they encounter situations of uncertainty and revert back to their complaining ways instead of looking to the healing God for their help. Exodus 20:20 says that God tests the people so that they can learn to fear Him and keep from sinning. But Israel repeatedly failed that test.

But before we point a finger at them, we should remember that we too can be slow learners, can't we? Our go-to response to adversity is often bitterness, grumbling, and lashing out, instead of quiet confidence in our God as we wait patiently for Him to provide. And this is why we so desperately need Jesus. We fail the test. But Jesus passed the test with flying colors. And He passed it in our place!

The sinlessness of Christ is not just some cool fact of history. Our very salvation rests on that fact. Theologians refer to this as the "active obedience of Christ." It was necessary for Jesus to obey all the Law perfectly, if He was to be our perfect sacrifice for our sin. We needed a perfect substitute. If He sinned, even once, He would just be another sinner like us. But the good news is that He never sinned, so we have a perfect, saving Substitute to meet our need.

One example of this in the New Testament comes when Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After forty days of fasting, do you think that Jesus was hungry and thirsty? Of course, He was. And one of the temptations has to do with that longing for food. The devil says, "*If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.*" Jesus responds, "*It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God'*" (Matthew 4:3-4). So Jesus, after He passed through the waters of the Jordan (like Israel), was in the wilderness (just like Israel), where He was tested (like Israel), for forty days (just like Israel's forty years), He was famished (just like Israel), but instead of complaining (like Israel) He shows His confidence in the Father and His understanding of how vital it is for us to have His instruction. Indeed, in each temptation He quotes Scripture that Israel received while they were wandering in the wilderness.

He has entered their situation, identified with His people in their wilderness struggle, "but instead of failing, He did not yield to temptation but triumphed obediently and victoriously."<sup>20</sup> Those verses are not about Bible memorization (as important as that is). They are about the Son of God passing the test that the rest of humanity failed, that you and I failed. And the Gospel is such wonderful news to us because through faith in Christ, trusting in His work on the cross and His resurrection alone as the basis for our salvation, we get credit for His exam. His perfect track record of obedience and faith is credited to the believer's account. Aren't you glad Jesus wasn't a complainer like us? If He was, we would still be in our sins.

But God heals our sin through another piece of wood. Not one cast into the bitter waters of Marah. But one that His Son was cast upon when He bore our bitter sins in judgment and, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, "*was pierced for our transgressions [and]...crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.*" Yahweh-Rophe. The God who heals. Providing the cure, by putting Himself under the knife for us. And administering the cure through faith in His Saving wounds that heal nations and nobodies (like us). Hallelujah, what a Savior! And all God's people said? Amen!

And His Spirit invites us to come to Him. Come to Him and He will supply us with the living water our soul needs. On the final page of this book, He says to us, "*Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life*" (Revelation 22:17). What an invitation. Trade your bitterness for life, your Marah for Elim.

Let's pray...

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<sup>1</sup> Really this will continue throughout the wilderness narratives, even beyond the book of Exodus (e.g., Numbers 14:2, 27, 29, 36; 16:11, 41; 17:5, 10).

<sup>2</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was executed by the Nazis in World War II, once wrote: "We, too, pass through the Red Sea, through the desert, across the Jordan into the promised land. With Israel we fall into doubt and unbelief and through punishment and repentance experience again God's help and faithfulness. All this is not mere reverie but holy, godly reality. We are torn out of our own existence and set down in the midst of the holy history of God on earth. There God dealt with us, and there He still deals with us,

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our needs and our sins, in judgment and grace.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1954), 53.

<sup>3</sup> Philip Graham Ryken, *Exodus: Saved for God’s Glory* (Preaching the Word; Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 413-414.

<sup>4</sup> John L. Mackay, *Exodus* (Fearn, Ross-Shire, England: Mentor, 2001), 278; also cited in Ryken, 414-415.

<sup>5</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, “Marah Better Than Elim” (No. 2301), *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim, 1973), 39:151.

<sup>6</sup> Tony Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Exodus* (Christ-Centered Exposition; Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 93.

<sup>7</sup> Ryken, 415. Ryken continues, “It is important for us to know where we are in the Christian life. We have not yet reached the promised land. We are still in the wilderness, where God is sanctifying us. Knowing this keeps us from having the wrong expectations and also enables us to ‘consider it pure joy... whenever [we] face trials of many kinds, because [we] know that the testing of [our] faith develops perseverance’ (Jas. 1:2, 3).”

<sup>8</sup> David Strain, “The Bitter Blessing of a Wilderness Life,” preached to First Presbyterian Church of Jackson, Mississippi, on March 15, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Tim Chester, *Exodus for You* (Denmark: The Good Book Company, 2016), 116.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Strain, “The Bitter Blessing of a Wilderness Life.” Much of this section is influenced by this resource.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses*, 2:265, Quoted in Ryken, 419.

<sup>15</sup> Ryken, 418; Strain, “The Bitter Blessing...”; Chester, 116. But note, as Phil Ryken points out, “These requirements were not the basis for Israel’s salvation. They were already saved! God had delivered them out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. He had brought them through the sea. But now it was time for their sanctification; so God gave them his law. He did not say, ‘Do this and I will save you.’ First he saved them, and then he said, ‘Now here are some things that I want you to do.’ If God had done it the other way around, then their salvation would have come by works. But as it is, salvation always comes by grace through faith. If these commands were not for Israel’s salvation, then what were they for? They were for Israel’s sanctification. Genuine, saving faith is always followed by joyful good works. God wants us to do more than simply believe what he has done; he also wants us to obey what he has commanded. God gave Israel these instructions to help them live for his glory. Once we have been saved from sin, the way to experience the fullness of God’s blessing is to trust and obey.” Ryken, 420.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 421.

<sup>17</sup> E.g., Matthew 8:17; 9:2; Mark 2:5; Luke 7:47. Along the lines, Ryken explains, “The power to heal is another confirmation that Jesus is the Savior. Jesus was famous for his healing miracles. He went around ‘preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people’ (Matt. 4:23). Everyone Jesus healed received a physical blessing. But this pointed to a deeper reality—namely, that Jesus is the remedy for everything that ails our sin-sick souls. He is the doctor of our salvation. Whatever healing we need—physical healing for disease and disability, spiritual healing for sin, or emotional healing for the wounds we receive from others—we are to look to Jesus. Some of our diseases will not be healed until the resurrection, but they will all be healed, because Jesus has promised to heal them” (421).

<sup>18</sup> David Strain offers some helpful remarks on this point: “I think we often struggle with this important principle in the Christian life partly because we don’t want to obscure anything, we don’t want anything to obscure the good news that salvation is a gift of God’s free grace, apart from any merit of our own or any work that we might perform. Amen to that. That is a glorious and precious truth. But it must not be allowed to obscure another equally important truth that progress in the Christian life and a good deal of its happiness and blessedness is conditioned upon our faithful, dutiful obedience. The blessed life, the life that’s led by green pastures and quiet waters, the life that finds oasis in the wilderness, is the obedient life. Jesus said in John 14:21, ‘Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he is it who loves me and he who loves me will be loved by my Father and I will love him and manifest myself to him.’ He said in John 15:9-11, ‘As the Father has loved me, so I love you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you that my joy may be in you and your joy may be full.’ Obedience, Jesus says, leads to an experience of the love of the Father and the Son who come to us with new depth and intimacy and manifest themselves to us. Obedience, Jesus says, leads to abiding in Christ and the fullness of joy. Obedience makes the bitter waters sweet, do you see? Or Psalm 1 puts it this way in language that echoes the lessons of Marah and Elim. ‘Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked nor stands in the way of sinners, sits in the seat of scoffers. His delight is in the law of the Lord and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yield its fruit in season and its leaf does not wither. In all he does he prospers.’ The evergreen life, the blessed life, the life that finds living water in a dry land, is a life of faith that obeys and delights in the law of the Lord. And those two things go together, you know. The life that forgets the salvation of God in Christ and so grumbles about today’s crises is not likely to be a life that joyfully obeys the Lord believing that is it the Lord your healer who will provide you with the water you need for your journey. But a life that clings to the cross, to Jesus who has rescued us, that is a life that knows that God’s ways are the best ways, even when they are the hardest ways. It knows that His paths, though steep, are always sure and that His trials are for our good. It’s a life that listens diligently to the voice of the Lord our God and does what is right in His eyes, an obedient life, a life that finds satisfaction from the hands of Jehovah-Rophe, ‘the Lord our healer.’ A wilderness life can sometimes make us forget if we’re not careful, so keep looking back. Train your eye and give it the habit of looking constantly to the cross. And a wilderness life is designed to teach us to obey. The obedient life is the good life and the bitter waters turn sweet for all who give themselves to it. May the Lord



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keep us looking to the cross and living a life of obedience to the joy of our hearts and the praise of His name.” Strain, “The Bitter Blessing...”

<sup>19</sup> Ryken, 422.

<sup>20</sup> Merida, 101.