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### When Bitter Waters Flow - Exodus 15:22-27

**Introduction** – Bitterness boils under the surface. It is not easily identified at first. But when it comes up, it defiles many. Bitterness is a sin that distracts us, because it keeps us looking away from our own sin, concentrating on someone else's (real or perceived) offense instead. It is a sin which has destroyed countless marriages and many churches. The fertile ground for bitterness is when we walk by sight and not by faith. Living high, autonomous lives when things are going well, this kind of self-absorption quickly turns sour when trials come. Our flesh screams to run, to desert, to look for the quick fix, and to grumble about others and even God for our *undeserved* circumstances.

**The Bitter Waters of Marah** – This passage is the beginning of a new section in Exodus, where Israel's rebellion and unbelief is revealed in the midst of God's testing. God delivered Israel, setting her free from centuries of bondage to Egypt, miraculously delivering her and destroying her enemies. Moses and Miriam have led the people in a praise celebration of God's victory (15:1-21), and now they set off for the Promised Land. Everything is right. Life is good. And then...

**Three Days – No Water** (v22) – First, this is a real and difficult trial. Three days and no water, and you start to panic. When such trials come, no one needs to deny that they are real and that they are hard. But the Lord doesn't need to reveal their thirst; He needs to reveal their bitterness.

**God Provides – Bitter Water** (vv23-24) – Just when it looks as though the Lord had provided, it turned out to be terribly bitter water. They turned and "*complained against Moses.*" This term, "*grumbling,*" shows up for the first time here, but again in Chapters 16, 17, Numbers 14, 16, 17, and Joshua 9. In every instance it reflects more than just grumbling, but a rebellious attitude of unbelief against God or His leaders and authority.

**God "Shows" a Way** (vv25-26) – The root form of the verb "*shows*" is where the Hebrew noun, Torah, comes from. Torah, or Law, is God's gracious instruction in how to find God's blessing. And this is what God miraculously does. In the midst of the grumbling, God promises that He will not do Israel what He did to Egypt. He is their Healer and He heals the waters. He heals their bitterness.

**Another Place** (v27) – The Lord proves His ability to provide even beyond what the people were asking by leading them to another place. The twelve wells and seventy palms are Hebrew images of perfection. David will later write of the Good Shepherd, "*...he makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters.*"

**Your Bitter Waters** – Paul teaches us to see Israel's time in the wilderness as paradigmatic for us, the Christian church, and it's members individually (1 Cor 10:1-13). Not only are we told that they are examples to us, but that they are examples of unbelieving rebellion and idolatry. At the bottom, this is what the root of bitterness will bring to the people of God (Heb 12:14-15). It will defile many with *wrath, anger, clamor, evil speaking, and malice* (Eph 4:30-31).

**Walking by Sight and not by Faith** – Everything is going great. And then everything is not, or so it seems. God is worthy to be praised in both instances (as Job did), looking for the blessing in both circumstances. But, when our eyes are on the circumstances, our faith falters, and we fall into bitterness.

**Identifying Bitterness** – A mind that cannot set aside the countless details of another's offenses is a mind tempted towards bitterness. A heart that does not want to forgive is a heart tempted towards bitterness. A soul that covets another's spouse, children, possessions, or circumstances is a soul tempted towards bitterness. In fact, these may not be evidences of temptation, but rather of the real

thing. What spills out of you when you are bumped (James 3:11-14)?

**Grumbling and Complaining** – When life takes a hard turn, this kind of ‘bump’ reveals what is really in your heart. When we are bitter, we may be able to prove to others how we have been wronged by someone, but that gives us no right to our own sin. And when we are wronged, we should remember Thomas Watson’s idea that we know all about the one who *brought* this trial to us and forget the One who *sent* it (Phil 2:14).

**Suspensions** – As the Israelites continue through the wilderness, they become suspicious of Moses and of God. They start doubting that God’s hand is on their leader because of the trials he has brought them. Bitterness encourages finger-pointing.

**Short-Term Solutions** – God’s solution for Israel is to consistently heed His voice and do what is right (15:25) while the people’s solution seems to be to want to go back to Egypt (14:12, 16:3). Rather than persevering in the ways the Lord sets before us, when we are walking by sight and not by faith, we are tempted to look for the quick-fix.

**The Tree and the Law** – As God provided the tree to make the waters sweet, He also showed the people His way to blessing – “*diligently heed the voice of the Lord your God and do what is right in His sight.*” What does this mean if we find ourselves bitter?

**Confess Your Sin** – Whether in your household, or in the community, the only way to foster a spirit of mercy and forgiveness is to confess sins (1 John 1:9). And remember, your bitterness has nothing whatsoever to do with another person’s real or imagined sin. So don’t connect any dots in the midst of your confession – that’s simply justifying the sin.

**Cultivate Contentment and Thanksgiving** – Contentment is the gift of God in all circumstances and is to be cultivated by faith (Phil 4:11-13). Paul says he had to learn this, and so do we. The faith that God has given us is not only faith in God’s faithfulness to get us to heaven, but to provide for us in our marriages, our children, our church, our employment, or even for ordinary water.

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