

Prayer

Loving Lord Jesus Christ, by Your Cross and Resurrection You have overcome the problems of the world. Minister to all whose lives remain scarred by illness, injury, bitterness, despair, pain, and every kind of personal anguish. Make it clear to us where we can be of help or where we should stand aside, so that Your perfect will may be done for those who need Your help: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Learn a passage of Scripture and use it during the day as a means of keeping close to the Lord (e.g. Rom 1:16,17, 12:1,2, Heb 10:22, 1 Thess 5:16-18)

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the farming community** *Pray for those who are investing in farming and seeking to find better ways to feed people; pray they will be blessed*
- *Pray for nations of the world where there is unrest just now*
- *Give thanks to God for your family and their life and health*

Meditation

Let us start believing;
Not because we must,
but because Jesus Christ has saved us!

Let us start praying;
Not just when we need to,
but when the Lord prompts us!

Let us start listening;
Not because we ought to,
but because the Saviour loves us!

Let us start rejoicing;
Not just when we want to,
but when the Holy Spirit leads us!

Let us start living;
Not because we have no option,
but because our God has set us free!

Let us start expecting;
Not just when we have a reason,
but for all of the time God gives us!

Bible passage - Exodus 15:22-27

²² Then Moses ordered Israel to set out from the Red Sea, and they went into the wilderness of Shur. They went three days in the wilderness but found no water. ²³ When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water there because it was bitter; which is why it was named Marah. ²⁴ So the people grumbled against Moses and said, 'What are we to drink?' ²⁵ Then Moses cried out to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a tree branch. He threw it into the water and the water became sweet.

It was there that the LORD made for them rules and regulations and put them to the test; ²⁶ He said, 'If you will listen carefully to the voice of the LORD your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and if you pay attention to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will not

bring on you any of the diseases that I afflicted on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD who heals you.'

²⁷ They then arrived at Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees, and they camped there by the water.

Bible Study

Review

After the defeat of the Egyptians at the Red Sea, Israel's Egyptian past was left behind, and the people of Israel found themselves in the wilderness, beginning their journey towards the Promised Land. This journey was not merely a passage from one place to another. In common with many other journeys mentioned in the Bible, it was a spiritual as well as a physical journey, and this is the important message of our reading today.

When we read these verses quickly at the end of chapter 15 with its great song of salvation, they seem almost incidental. At first, the story line appears to be merely the first small incident of many to come in which the people of Israel 'grumbled' (15:24) against Moses because things were not turning out as they hoped. Indeed, the passage is far more interesting than that, for it outlines a pattern of events typical of many others in Exodus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, and it therefore acts as an introduction to the long narrative of what is called the 'wandering in the wilderness' of the people of Israel.

What is this pattern? We will see this evolve as we follow the story closely. The people of Israel firstly begin on the path God has given them, but soon discover problems (the water was bitter – 15:23). They then began to grumble against Moses, but their complaint was essentially against God Himself (15:24). Moses then intercedes for the people, God gives Moses a solution to the problem (15:25), and then the people of Israel are put at peace (15:27). This cycle of problem, complaint, solution (through a leader) and then peace, is typical of much of the rest of the Old Testament. The stories in Exodus of Israel wandering in the wilderness repeat this pattern almost endlessly, for example, when the people cry out for food (16:1-36) and then when they become thirsty again (17:1-7). The pattern is also discernable throughout Judges (see chapter 2) and in later years during the ministry of the prophets (e.g. see Isaiah 7,8)

The last part of our passage, however, is sometimes thought of a mystery, for the text talks about the Lord making rules and regulations for His people, to '*put them to the test*' (15:25). The Lord is then quoted as calling on Israel to pay attention to these commands so that the people will not suffer as the Egyptians did, because the Lord is the one who heals the people (15:26). This is a wonderful passage, partly because within it, we find a promise of God to heal. But what does this all mean? No particular rule or set of commands is mentioned here (such as the Ten Commandments).

At this point, we call on what we learned earlier about the passage, which is that it is a pattern for what is to come. Read like this, these verses tell us that as God's people respond to events on their journey, then they will be given the chance to learn more about God through His commands and statutes (15:26). Of course, we know that this will indeed happen because the Israelites will soon come to Mount Sinai when God will give them the 'Law' (Exodus 20). In addition, these verses tell the Israelites that if they turn to the Lord instead of being stubborn (like the Egyptians), then the Lord will be able to heal them because it is His nature to do so.

Read like this, our passage is a challenge and a great source of encouragement. It teaches us that on the journey God places before us we all have choices, and if we are to remain on God's path, then we must pay attention to what He has told us if we are to arrive successfully at our destination. In this passage, the final destination is 'Elim' (15:27), which in contrast with the waters of Marah, is a haven of rest, tranquillity, and water. Elim was only a temporary place of rest for the Israelites, but in the narrative of Exodus, it symbolises the eventual rest of a completed journey.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- The waters at Marah
- Moses performs a miracle
- Rules and regulations
- Healing

Going Deeper

Some people have asked why it is that there are two stories of Moses providing the people with water in Exodus; this story and Exodus 17:1-7 (the water from the rock at Rephidim). The answer may be that many miracles were performed by Moses as the people journeyed from Egypt, but this early one became useful as a sign of what was to come and a demonstration of how God dealt with His people. This is what we will now explore in more detail.

The waters at Marah

The people of Israel were ordered by Moses to set out from the Red Sea in the general direction of the wilderness of Shur. If you have a Bible with maps in it, you may find that part of the Sinai peninsula is marked as the 'wilderness of Shur', generally that part of it nearest to Egypt. Frankly, there is little certainty about any of the names or places mentioned in this passage, and the designation in Bible maps simply comes from what this passage tells us. Some scholars are fairly certain that if the people of Israel tracked down the eastern side of the Red Sea towards Mount Sinai (as mentioned in Exodus 19), then it might be possible to identify 'Marah' and 'Elim' as the present day places of 'Ain Hawarah' and 'Wadi Charandl'. Unfortunately, there is no way that this can be verified, and it is best not to presume too much about a route which, to this day, has proved notoriously difficult to pin down with accuracy. Despite this, the meaning of the journey is far clearer.

It is interesting that the original request Moses brought to Pharaoh was for the people of Israel to journey for three days into the wilderness in order to worship the Lord (5:3; 8:27). Here, the Israelites journey for three days and then fail to worship the Lord, they grumble! Clearly, lack of water would have been a major concern for Israel, as they were travelling not just on their own, but with cattle and flocks as well (12:32). The story implies that the people anticipated obtaining water for supplies and also watering their flocks at Marah, but when they arrived, the water was 'bitter'. It is reasonably well attested that some water sources in the desert regions of Sinai were and are bitter to the taste due to mineral deposits deep underground, though it does not help us to try and find a rational explanation for this event. The Israelites clearly expected good water but found none, and it was a potential catastrophe for the people after the mixture of awe and excitement at their deliverance through the Red Sea.

Moses performs a miracle

We might expect that having seen the Lord's deliverance at the Red Sea, the people might have had confidence in the Lord's provision, but their feelings were dominated by the situation they faced, like many people before and after. It is interesting that the people were said to have grumbled 'against Moses', rather than against the Lord. But from their point of view, Moses was their contact with the Lord and by grumbling against their leader, they grumbled against God. This was not the first time that the people had grumbled against Moses, of course. Initially they had complained at his attempts to persuade Pharaoh to let them go (5:20,21), and also when they saw the Egyptians coming closer as they camped on the shores of the Red Sea (14:11f.). In the book of Exodus as a whole, the theme of grumbling against God is significant, and the first person to grumble against Him was Moses himself (4:12f.)! Moses was probably understanding of this characteristic of his own people, and in this incident, he did not respond with any personal feeling or animosity; he did what a good leader should do, which was to turn to God for an answer to the people's problem.

The Lord led Moses to the branch of a tree, and he threw into the water to make it drinkable (15:25). Again, it is too tempting to try and explain this miracle because it is too easy for us to look back and suggest that a chemical reaction took place. But Scripture undoubtedly presents this to us as a work of God alone (just as in Elisha's first miracle changing 'bad' water to 'good' - 2 Kings 2:19). The pattern of God's work is thus established; when the people complain to God, their leader must look to God and do what the Lord says in order to help them, and because the complaint arises because of something the people either cannot cope with, understand or do, then what is needed must be a miracle of some kind. It is a pattern that is found not just in Exodus, but also in Judges (see the story of Deborah - Judges 4) and also throughout the Old Testament. Eventually, the miracle of the coming of the Messiah is required because of the sins of the people and their inability to do God's will!

Rules and regulations

When verse 25 says 'it was there that the Lord made for them rules and regulations and put them to the test', it is hard to imagine what was going on. No specific rules are mentioned, and if some rules were given, surely they would be important and recorded, certainly if they were ones which should be kept in order to avoid the 'diseases of the Egyptians' and obtain the Lord's healing (15:26)! We have two options; either verse 26 is a generalisation of what happened in the desert journeys of the Israelites, or the 'rules and regulations' refers to the Lord's general instructions to leave Egypt in the first place, perhaps linked to the rules and regulations of the Passover and Unleavened Bread.

Some commentators on Exodus favour the second option, but that means we must think of those rules and regulations as having been given later on in the story than where Exodus places them. Verse 25 says 'it was there that the Lord made rules ...', but Exodus tells us that Passover and Unleavened Bread instructions were given to Moses earlier (12:1-27; 12:43-13:16).

The best way to work out this passage is to consider that the whole episode of grumbling against Moses about the water at Marah was a test. Within this event, the Lord gave some specific instruction, perhaps even telling the people to 'drink this water' (after Moses had thrown in the tree branch!), and then commanding them to be obedient. Whatever happened, what was remembered and recorded for us was a generalisation; 'If you will listen carefully to the voice of the LORD your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and if you pay attention to his commandments and keep all his statutes ...' (15:26). This phrase becomes the basis of how Moses' speaks to the Israelites when commanding the people to do the Lord's will in future years (see Deuteronomy 3:6; 4:1; 7:12; 18:19 etc). The rules given at Marah were a small sample of the rules and regulations to follow (e.g. the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20), but obedience was what God required of His people, long before they were given.

Healing

The passage ends with a precious promise of healing. However, it is not to be thought of as some automatic healing, as if mere obedience to the Lord meant that the people would be healed. The Hebrew of the text, and hopefully this translation, makes it clear that obedience to the Lord's commands is something which makes it possible for the Lord to be a healer. This is important, for people sometimes expect God to heal irrespective of whether they have been faithful to God. The Lord is certainly merciful, but our passage urges all the Lord's people to be obedient in order to have the access to His healing power that is their right. It is also true that disobedience can prevent the Lord from being a healer, in some instances, as He would wish.

The expectation however is that God's people will do their best to be obedient to Him, and therefore find the peace and rest of what is described as the twelve springs of Elim. No-one knows where this place is, and it was doubtless somewhere on the journey of the Israelites in the desert. However, it represents the safety and haven of being obedient to God, and receiving the healing that He longs to give.

Application

We can take a number of things from this passage. Firstly, it is a reminder of how easy it is for us to forget the miracles of the past when a new crisis confronts us. Most Christians will be familiar with such circumstances, for most of us have seen people who have experienced the Lord's blessings, even miracles of healing, but have fled from faith when life has become hard in an unexpected way. It is a characteristic of life that we will have all manner of unexpected experiences. The great test of our faith and obedience is whether our faith in God remains constant through whatever happens to us. This is true of all relationships, of course, but it is especially true of our relationship with the Lord.

The second interesting feature of this story is the reminder it gives us that when God's people complain against their leader, they complain against God. This is a difficult matter, for some would say that if this is the case, how can we deal with bad leaders? Surely we should we not complain against them? The answer is this; there is a difference between complaining against God by complaining against your leader, as in today's passage, and complaining against your leader because he or she is a bad leader, for this is an issue that should be addressed, wherever possible. In a world in which complaint is a common feature of many cultures, we do well to examine our motives and ourselves carefully before complaining. There will always be things we experience that need our attention, but we must not allow ourselves to be ruled by a culture of complaint, particularly in church. This must surely be true in the church, given the painful history of Israel's culture of complaint against God.

Finally, the last verse of our passage reassures the people of Israel that rest and the Promised Land will one day be found. Each of us needs to experience places like 'Elim' along the pathway of our own Christian journey. We will find places of healing and rest, and they are like an assurance that the Lord is indeed helping us on our way. He does indeed have a place for us in the eternal home of His heaven.

Discipleship

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss the incident at Marah. What can this brief story teach us in the church today?

2. In what ways are Christians called upon to be obedient to God, when we have been saved by grace according to faith?
3. How important is the healing ministry to the life of God's people today. Should we, or should we not expect people to be 'healed' when they are faithful Christians?

Topics covered by this text

- *Trust in God for the future*
- *The need for leadership and for miracles*
- *The importance of rules and regulations*
- *Places of rest*

Personal comments by author

How easy do you find it to be obedient? There are many places in the New Testament where Jesus says things like 'love one another' (John 13:34), or 'do this in remembrance of me' (1 Cor 11:24,25), or 'turn the other cheek' (Matt 5:39), but what importance do we give these commands of Jesus? Each of them is like a challenge that requires our response, and we can only be honest if we address them one by one, as the Lord brings them to our attention. They cannot be avoided!

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Take a diary with you for a week and write down in it anything you believe that God is saying to you about how you should behave and what you should do. At the end of the week, look back at the diary and assess how you have measured against these things. It is a salutary exercise!*
- *Pray for those who you know who have difficulty with understanding why God will not do for them what they need, whether it is healing or help in a difficult situation. Bless them in prayer and do what you can for them.*

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, save me from imagining more of myself than is true or right. Help me to understand the call You have placed on my life, and give me the grace to accept the things You have asked me to do; then, as I live each day, may I be content to do Your will. AMEN
