
FROM THE MINISTRY OF



THRU the BIBLE

A close-up photograph of a hand reaching out of the water, with the sun low on the horizon creating a golden glow and shimmering reflections on the water's surface.

BITTER
TO *Sweet*

GOD'S ANSWERS TO
LIFE'S DISAPPOINTMENTS

DR. J. VERNON MCGEE

INTRODUCTION

Expectations are cruel companions. Rarely do they deliver and most assuredly, they leave us ... disappointed. *I thought that would be different ... I had hoped for something else* We've all experienced it; you don't even need to ask. What's different in our experiences is what we learn from these disappointing moments.

Dr. J. Vernon McGee, trusted and beloved pastor and Bible teacher—who was no stranger to life's challenges—leads us back to the wilderness to learn how not to turn bitter in those moments of dashed expectations but, instead, how to turn to God.

God's Word will be our guide—don't jump over the verses (there's life in them!). Each word, as Dr. McGee will tell us, was given to us as a warning or instruction or encouragement.

We'll start now in the desert, just after the most amazing rescue in history ...

BITTER TO SWEET

GOD'S ANSWERS TO LIFE'S DISAPPOINTMENTS

So Moses brought Israel from the Red Sea; then they went out into the Wilderness of Shur. And they went three days in the wilderness and found no water. Now when they came to Marah, they could not drink the waters of Marah, for they were bitter. Therefore the name of it was called Marah. And the people complained against Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?" So he cried out to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a tree. When he cast it into the waters, the waters were made sweet –Exodus 15:22–25

This remarkable experience of the people of Israel is our subject, but before diving in let's look at a letter the apostle Paul sent to Christians in Corinth. Stay with me:

Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. –1 Corinthians 10:11

Just before this Paul recited how God provided both food and drink for Israel during their long trek through the wilderness, and then he makes a surprising declaration: Their experiences

were recorded for *us*. Why? They are examples for you and me as we walk the pilgrim pathway through this world's wilderness. Before we can even fathom that, he gives us a warning:

Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.

-1 Corinthians 10:12

What the children of Israel experienced while going through the wilderness corresponds to our Christian experience; you can translate what happened to them directly over to the life of any believer today. We can expect to encounter the same problems and expect the same solutions to work for us. Every believer will experience their own particular version of what happened to the Israelites in the wilderness.

I don't believe *any* child of God can escape going through these experiences—they're normal and natural to the Christian life. Therefore it's helpful for you and me to follow the children of Israel for just a little way into the wilderness so we can learn something valuable from their experience.

When the children of Israel crossed the Red Sea, they crossed as a *redeemed* people. God had redeemed them by blood and by power out of the land of Egypt. And when they crossed over the Red Sea and came safely to the other side, they sang the song of Moses. Up to that point they murmured and complained—they actually wanted to go back to slavery, back to the brickyards of Egypt. But then God marvelously and miraculously opened the Red Sea—thanks to Moses' faith—and they crossed over. Then these people believed, entered the wilderness by faith, and could sing the song of Moses.

Look at just a couple of verses that show they were a redeemed people and understood this fact:

The Lord is my strength and song, and He has become my salvation; He is my God, and I will praise Him; my father's God, and I will exalt Him. -Exodus 15:2

They were a saved people singing “God is my salvation,” if you please.

You in Your mercy have led forth the people whom You have redeemed; You have guided them in Your strength to Your holy habitation. –Exodus 15:13

They have crossed the Red Sea and are singing, calling themselves a redeemed people.

It’s interesting, as you go through the Word of God you find that only redeemed people can sing praise to God from the heart. Anybody can sing the blues, but to sing from the heart with joy, you must be a redeemed person. So they began their march through the wilderness with a song and great joy.

How inexpressibly wonderful this was! All their lives they had been slaves in the land of Egypt, without a ray of hope on the horizon that they would ever be free. They were born into the brickyards of Egypt, and for all they knew they would stay there until death. There was not even a flicker of hope.

Then something wonderful happened. Moses appeared back in the land of Egypt and said, “*God has sent me.*” God brought these people out through the plagues of judgment upon Egypt, redeeming them by blood on that night of the Passover and by power at the Red Sea.

Imagine ... this tremendous company of people start off through the wilderness. They don’t have to go back into the brickyards to make a single brick. No longer will they feel the lash of the taskmaster. No longer will they groan under the burdens of Egypt. They are free, and they’re singing a wonderful song of redemption (read all of it in Exodus 15).

But then they were confronted with their first wilderness experience.

NO WATER

So Moses brought Israel from the Red Sea; then they went out into the Wilderness of Shur. And they went three days in the wilderness and found no water. –Exodus 15:22

Now that's bad, isn't it? These redeemed people start out through the wilderness according to God's instruction and after three days they still haven't found any water. They are crossing an arid and bleak wasteland, a desert that's as dry as anything in Arizona or California. It's *bad*, if you please.

Moses came to know that wilderness well. After living in it for 40 years keeping sheep for his father-in-law, he spent another 40 years there with the people of Israel. Eighty years in a wilderness makes one an authority, and near the end of those years Moses labeled the place "that great and terrible wilderness" and "the wasteland, a howling wilderness" (Deuteronomy 1:19 and 32:10). That's what it was.

After traveling for three days, all of their water supply was exhausted. I'm sure most of the families started out with a little jug or canteen filled with water, but that's all gone now. And, oh, they have a powerful craving for something to drink. They're parched and desperate. If God didn't provide for them, they would perish.

BUT WHY?

My beloved, their experience is contrary to the accepted notion people have today of how life should be for the child of God. Here is the way it would have played out if you were reading a fairy tale: Every thorn on every cactus in that wilderness would be taken off. Every sharp stone would be removed from their pathway. The mountains would be smoothed out, the valleys filled in, and God's chosen people would go through the wilderness with no problems, no difficulties, no hardships—not a care, not a burden, not a sigh nor a tear.

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Isn't that the way we hear some people present the Christian life today? According to them, becoming a Christian solves all your problems, resolves all your difficulties, and everything after is easy sailing.

But the moment the children of Israel were redeemed and got on the other side of the Red Sea, they faced bigger problems than they ever had in the land of Egypt. There is a certain freedom in slavery, and there is a certain slavery in freedom. After all, in Egypt they didn't worry about where they lived, what they ate, or what they would drink because the man who owned them took care of that. The minute somebody else takes charge of you, that very moment you lose your liberty and become a slave.

NEW THIRST

Egypt was called the breadbasket of the ancient world. That was the reason the patriarch Jacob and his sons moved down there in the first place. The famine was throughout the world, and they went to Egypt because that was the only place where they could get grain.

In the land of Egypt there was water and grain in abundance. Egypt didn't have to depend on rainfall, they depended on the river Nile—they even worshiped it. It overflowed its banks every spring. In Egypt you could fill your teakettle anytime you wanted to.

But for the people of Israel out there on that torrid desert, the cisterns of Egypt were far behind them, and suddenly their source of supply is cut off. They find themselves under different circumstances. In the wilderness there is always a scarcity of water, and it's a long way from one oasis to another. They have not yet found the fountain of living waters. It will take them a little while to do that.

The interesting thing is, they are having a legitimate experience. It was normal and natural—certainly there is nothing wrong with thirsting. And they are not out there in that wilderness because of some sin in their lives, nor are they out of the will of God. They are very much *in* the will of God—and yet they went three days thirsty. You explain that.

May I say to you, the Bible is a mirror for every child of God to look into. Paul said, “*All these things happened to them as examples for us.*” There are a thousand other experiences Moses could have recorded. He recorded only seven because they are examples for us. My, we ought to learn the lessons, because this thirsting is the experience of every born-again child of God.

If you are a child of God, am I not now describing your experience? After you were redeemed—after that time you came to Christ, received Him as Savior, and things became different—didn’t you find that the cisterns of Egypt failed to satisfy you? Isn’t that what happened? Remember how, right after you were saved, you attempted to continue in the same lifestyle and it didn’t work, it didn’t satisfy? Wasn’t that your experience?

Then there was that period of soul-thirst, a yearning and a passion for the things of God. At first you had trouble finding satisfaction—perhaps still you have not found it. Sooner or later, though, if you are a child of God you are going to find the fountain.

Years ago when Billy Graham had his first campaign in Los Angeles, many were saved but then went into liberal churches. One man told me, “I went to a dozen churches!” He was saved, but he knew almost nothing about the Bible. Talk about going three days in the wilderness without water, this man almost died of thirst! Then somebody, out of a clear blue sky, said, “Why don’t you go down to the Church of the Open Door? That preacher is a rank fundamentalist.” But this man came to my church anyway. He stayed because he was thirsty, and he found the water of the Word there.

When many other of the Lord's disciples left Him, our Lord asked Simon Peter if he would leave, also. Simon Peter replied, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68).

Later Peter wrote, "As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word ..." (1 Peter 2:2). Have you ever seen a little one when its mother holds up the bottle of formula? If you have ever seen perpetual motion, that's it. Not a muscle in that little body isn't moving: hands, feet, mouth, eyes—everything is saying, "Give it to me!"

The apostle Paul said after he was converted, "But what things were gain to me, those I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord." Then he goes on to reveal his great longing and thirst: "That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings ..." (Philippians 3:7, 8, 10). In other words, Paul said, *When I came to Christ, it revolutionized my bookkeeping system—what was loss became gain, and what was gain became loss. It turned me inside out and upside down and right side up. Oh, that I might know Him.* My, was he thirsty! Believe me, friend, he knew what it was to go three days in the wilderness without water.

Our Lord spoke to the woman of Samaria:

Jesus answered and said to her, "Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water..."—John 4:13–15

She was thirsty. Are you? The Lord Jesus stood on that great day of the feast in the temple and said, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink" (John 7:37).

While I was pastor of Church of the Open Door, we had a Thursday night Bible study that was very successful. Why? Because we had so many people there who were thirsty—the new converts. I enjoyed teaching them. The old saints—well, they had been filled up and nothing was running out, I guess. But the new ones were so thirsty. A couple told me one night, “We drive fifty miles every Thursday night, and we can hardly wait from one Thursday night to another.” A lot of folk, though, had no trouble waiting. Our Lord said, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled” (Matthew 5:6). I believe thirsting is the experience of every new believer who goes three days in the wilderness without water.

My friend, it might be well to go back to the Red Sea to determine if you really crossed it, to see whether you are redeemed. If you are God’s child, you can’t go through the wilderness of this world without water and not get thirsty.

This is the first lesson we are to learn from Israel’s wilderness experience.

BITTER WATER

Now to the second experience. Note this very carefully:

Now when they came to Marah, they could not drink the waters of Marah, for they were bitter. Therefore the name of it was called Marah. –Exodus 15:23

Marah means “bitter.” When the people of Israel (more than two million of them) come to Marah, the water is bitter, and they can’t drink it. Remember—oh, keep remembering—that they are redeemed people. They are on the line of march. God had marked their route on the map, and they are following it. They are not out of the will of God. They are at Marah because God sent them to Marah.

Listen to me very carefully: Bitter experiences come to the child of God after conversion. I don't know how to explain it, but I know it happens. It's puzzling and perplexing. How many times have you heard from a new convert, "Why does God let this happen to me?"

The apostle Peter, who knew something about suffering, said,

Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you.

-1 Peter 4:12


He didn't write as if something was *going* to happen; he wrote it in the present tense. He said it *is* happening to you, new converts. You *are* having trouble. Trials *do* come.

Now I can't explain it, but I can give this word of comfort: God is not punishing you, and you don't need to ask, "Why does God let this happen to me?" God is educating you; He is preparing you for something. In the pathway of every believer there is a Marah. Have you come to yours yet? If you haven't, it's out there ahead of you. Many of you have been there—some of you are there right now.

But I have good news for you: Marah isn't a place to live—it's merely a camping ground. *God brings you to Marah, but He won't leave you at Marah.* But let me say it again because it's important: He will bring you there. In the pathway of every believer there is Marah, bitterness.

While at my first pastorate in Nashville, Tennessee, I held meetings in the hills of middle Tennessee in a little place called Woodbury. There was an elder in that church, a doctor whom I learned to love. He and I hunted squirrels together many times.

One night after I had spoken on the passage where our Lord sends the disciples out into a storm, he asked to make a house call. The manse I lived in was an old-time house built before the



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Civil War, and it had a great, big fireplace. That evening we sat together around a brisk fire. The pastor was there with his wife, and the doctor came in and sat down with us.

He said, "You know, I went away to college to study and go as a medical missionary. When I finished medicine, I went before the board. They examined me and said, 'You can't go. Your health won't permit you to go to a foreign field.' I had prepared all my life to go as a missionary, and now I am told I can't go! Honestly, in bitterness I came way up here to this little town."

I asked him, "Is the bitterness over?"

"Oh, yes," he said, "I got over it years ago."

"Do you think God was in that experience?"

"Oh, yes, I know that now."

That doctor had taken twelve young men in that town, led them to the Lord, and sent them away to college. A half dozen of them had become medical doctors, and the other six trained and were on the field as missionaries. I learned the little town of Woodbury sort of rested on that doctor's shoulders. I never walked down the street with him without somebody stopping to ask him something—not just about their health, but about everything. If they were going to sell a cow or a pig, they would ask his opinion! When I heard of his death years later, I wondered how Woodbury, Tennessee, got along without him. I'm sure they survived, but they missed him. My, how important he was in that little town.

May I say to you, how bitter it was for that young doctor to be told he couldn't go as a medical missionary. God brought him down by Marah, but He didn't leave him there. He led him down there so He could really use him. God brings His own down by Marah, if you please.

At the same church in Nashville, the superintendent of the junior department was an unmarried lady. She had premature gray hair, and I mean it was genuine. You can't tell today. If someone is a blonde or brunette or redhead, you don't know if that's her natural color or not. But in that day, gray hair really meant something.

She was one of the most wonderful people I ever met. Very few of the juniors she taught went to the mission field, but they all went out into life to live for God. She followed them closely and she had an influence.

She was a beautiful woman, also. I asked the superintendent of the Sunday school, "Why in the world didn't Miss Anna May get married?" He told me her story: "Before World War I, there was a fine-looking young man there in the church. They started going together and got engaged. Then the war started, and he was put in uniform. We all went down to the train station to see him off. I never shall forget how tenderly he told her goodbye. But he didn't come back. He was killed in the battle of the Marne, and he's buried over there. She took his picture down, put away every remembrance of him, and said, 'I will never marry.' And she didn't."

There aren't many girls like that today, fellows, I'll tell you. Oh, she was the real article. Later, when the superintendent and pastor asked her to take charge of the children in the junior department, she said, "I've been praying God would give me something to do. It will be my life's work."

God always brings His own down to the bitter waters of Marah so He can use them later on. And, oh, how useful she was! Hundreds of boys and girls were influenced by her.

When I first came to Los Angeles, I met a lawyer who told me, "Preacher, when I was first converted, I got my eye on a preacher and he disappointed me. I became bitter and cynical. I almost turned my back on God. How bitter I got!" Then he said, "I found

out you can't put your confidence in mere humans, Christian or not." This lawyer learned a very important lesson: Don't look to man, look to God. Keep your eyes on Christ.

Oh, the frustration, the keen disappointment, and the bitter experiences that come to God's children. There are times when the world tumbles in on us and we wonder what to do next. Maybe you have a little grave somewhere that is your Marah. Or maybe back yonder in your life you had some other experience that embittered you.

God have mercy on you if you are still hanging around Marah. God never intends His children to stay there.

The question is: What do you do with your Marahs? How do you meet them?

Notice what the children of Israel did first. "And the people complained against Moses, saying, 'What shall we drink?'" Oh, how many times when an experience becomes bitter have you and I said, "Lord, why? Why do You let this happen to me? Why do these bitter waters have to be in my life?"

Notice what Moses did:

So he cried out to the LORD, and the Lord showed him a tree. When he cast it into the waters, the waters were made sweet. There He made a statute and an ordinance for them, and there He tested them. –Exodus 15:25

Is there a natural explanation for this? Well, I've heard the formula for such a chemical reaction. I sat in the class of a wonderful scholar who said there is a tree that grows out there in the Sinai Peninsula which, when put in bitter water, will make it sweet. You can have that for what it's worth. I can give you the scientific formula, but it's not worth that to me, because I believe this was a miracle. That tree turned the bitter waters into sweet, if you please.

What is that tree for us today? What turns our bitter waters sweet? That tree is the cross of Christ.

Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree"). –Galatians 3:13

Oh, my friend, He was falsely accused, He was lied about, He was blasphemed, He was shamefully treated. He bore every bit of it, and He bore the curse of sin—yours and mine, if you please. It wasn't His at all. On that tree He tasted death for every member of the human family.

Do you remember the record in John 18 about the armed mob that came to Gethsemane to arrest the Lord? Simon Peter was so zealous for his Lord and wanted to protect Him the best he could, so he drew his sword and tried to use it.

So Jesus said to Peter, "Put your sword into the sheath. Shall I not drink the cup which my Father has given Me?" –John 18:11

Oh, it was bitter. Every time I drink from the cup at communion I try to concentrate on the sweetness. As I taste that sweetness, I think of the cup He drank. His was a bitter cup. That cup belonged to me—He took *my* cup, the bitter cup, that I might have the *sweet* cup. He did that for me.

Paul can write to you and me today, "O Death, where is your sting? O [grave], where is your victory?" (1 Corinthians 15:55). Our Lord went to the cross and removed the bitterness, if you please. He bore the curse.

Listen to Simon Peter again, because you and I are going to have difficulties unless we put the cross of Christ into the bitter experiences of life.

Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you [or which is testing you], as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. –1 Peter 4:12, 13

You and I, when the bitter experience comes, will be made bitter unless we bring the cross of Christ to bear in that experience.

*Must Jesus bear the cross alone and all the world go free?
No, there's a cross for everyone, and there's a cross for me.*

-Thomas Shepherd

How we need to accept that and translate it into life when the bitter experiences come to us.

ELIM

We come now to the third wilderness experience:

Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve wells of water and seventy palm trees; so they camped there by the waters.

-Exodus 15:27

Elim means “palm trees,” and at Elim they had 70 of them. Beside that, they had 12 wells of water! That was some oasis, wasn't it?

Elim suggests abundant blessing and fruitfulness. After Marah, God always brings His children to Elim—“Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning” (Psalm 30:5). You may lock Peter in the inner prison, but an angel is going to spring him before morning (see Acts 12). Paul and Silas may be beaten within an inch of their lives and put in a dungeon, but at midnight they're going to sing praises to God, and the doors of the prison will be flung open (see Acts 16).

God will take you down by Marah, but He won't leave you at Marah. There is an Elim ahead for the pilgrim today, because God's plan of usefulness goes by Marah to Elim. It always has; there's no exception.

Joseph—oh, the difficulties and problems this poor boy had! When his brothers came to him, it was with fear that he'd take revenge on them. He said, “*Wait, you meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.*” His Marah was when he was sold into slavery

WHEN YOU DRINK FROM
the cup at communion,
CONCENTRATE ON THE *Sweetness.*

THAT CUP BELONGED TO YOU -
He took your bitter cup,
SO YOU MIGHT HAVE
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by these jealous brothers, but there was Elim down the way. God brought Joseph to the oasis where there were, in effect, palm trees and an abundance of water (see Genesis 37–50).

David—oh, how wonderful it was to be a carefree shepherd boy. Then one day Samuel appeared and poured the anointing oil on him. After that, David was brought into the palace of Saul, and it looked like everything was going to be easy. Some say it ought to be easy for God’s man, but should it? One day David was before the king, playing his harp to soothe him, but Saul threw his spear at him. Saul tried to kill David because he hated him, and from that day on David took to the wilderness and the caves. Finally, he even cried out to God, “I’m hunted like a partridge.” There’s always a closed season on birds, but there was no closed season on David. Saul hunted him constantly. David lived like a partridge in the mountains.

But there came a day when God placed David on the throne. This rough and rugged man became the king of all Israel. He’s God’s man, he went down by Marah, but God brought him to Elim.

Life today lacks that which produces character and greatness, that which takes a man through a period where he eats the bread of adversity and drinks the water of affliction so he can say, as the apostle Paul said, “I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound” (Philippians 4:12). In this affluent and comfortable society in which you and I live, we may know how to *abound*, but how many today know how to be *abased*? My beloved, how we need to be abased, yet be able to trace the rainbow through the rain, as George Matheson wrote in the beloved hymn, “O Love That Will Not Let Me Go.”

*O joy that seeketh me through pain,
I cannot close my heart to Thee;
I trace the rainbow through the rain,
And feel the promise is not vain,
That morn shall tearless be.*

You can't have that rainbow without the rain.

Has God brought you down by Marah? You thought He made a mistake, didn't you? Maybe you thought you were out of the will of God. But He did it for a purpose, because He takes all of His children down by Marah. But, my friend, don't stay there. Don't live there in bitterness. Take the cross of Christ and put it into those bitter waters.


Have you been mistreated? Jesus was mistreated. Have you been lied about? He was lied about. Have you been unable to defend yourself? He chose not to. When He was falsely accused, He didn't open His mouth. Do you feel like there's been injustice in your life? Well, have you read the account of His trial? They nailed Him to a cross in the greatest crime of history. May I say, your little Marah and my little Marah are nothing compared to His. But put that cross into your experience, and it will turn your bitter waters to sweet.

Then go on to Elim. There are 70 palm trees there and 12 springs of water. Rest in the shade and sing your heart out in praise to God.

A photograph of two men, one Black and one white, smiling and talking to each other outdoors. They are gesturing with their hands as if in conversation. The background is slightly blurred, showing other people in a park-like setting.

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