

BITTER MADE SWEET

"So Moses brought Israel from the Red sea, and they went out into the wilderness of Shur; and they went three days in the wilderness, and found no water. And when they came to Marah, they could not drink of the waters of Marah, for they were bitter: therefore the name of it was called Marah. And the people murmured against Moses, saying, What shall we drink? And he cried unto the Lord; and the Lord shewed him a tree, which when he had cast into the waters, the waters were made sweet: there he made for them a statute and an ordinance, and there he proved them, And said, If thou wilt diligently hearken to the voice of the Lord thy God, and wilt do that which is right in his sight, and wilt give ear to his commandments, and keep all his statutes, I will put none of these diseases upon thee, which I have brought upon the Egyptians: for I am the Lord that healeth thee. And they came to Elim, where were twelve wells of water, and threescore and ten palm trees: and they encamped there by the water." Exodus 15:22-27.

For many years the children of Israel had been sojourning in the land of Egypt. So long as the influence of Joseph was felt their lot in the strange land was not a hard one. They increased in numbers, in possessions, and in solidarity. In fact, they grew so prosperous and strong that the kings began to fear their might. In order to avert an uprising or an alliance with the enemies of Egypt, one king adopted the autocratic policy of imposing heavy burdens on them and subjecting them to heartless taskmasters. They ate their bread in tears and spent their nights in pain.

Only one thing remained to shed a ray of cheer on the dismal picture that opened before them. They had in their hearts an unquenchable hope. They did not believe that they were born to be slaves forever. They hoped to some day depart from Egypt and wend their way at last to the promised land. In their oppression they were lifted up by a great hope.

And their hope was not destined to be disappointed. The hour of their deliverance came at last. You know the story of their thrilling escape by way of the Red Sea under the able leadership of Moses. They sang a hymn of thankfulness for deliverance from the hand of Pharaoh and his hosts. Gladness and joy had come; sorrow and sighing had fled away. That was a great day for them when they left Egypt behind them. They were definitely on the march now toward a higher stage of development in their national and religious life. They were on the threshold of great vital experiences which were to add richness and value to their life. And in the early stages of their course, they enjoyed the buoyancy and enthusiasm which only a new and promising adventure can arouse. But they soon discovered there was a vast difference between singing a song and living a life.

But, they were soon languishing in a dry and burning desert. Obstacles they had never dreamed existed lay everywhere before them. The hardships they had endured in Egypt were nothing to compare with the privations and dangers of the desert. Fear and discouragement seized their hearts.

Perhaps their keenest suffering was occasioned by their thirst. It is often true that the greatest triumphs of life are succeeded by the most vexatious inconveniences. God had divided the Red Sea for His people, yet He suffered them to go into places where there was no water to drink. You may be right even when the heaviest trial is oppressing you. You may be losing your property, your health may be failing, your prospects may be beclouded, and your friends may be leaving you one by one, yet in the midst of such dis-

asters your heart may be steadfast in faithfulness to God.

Finally, when they reached the waters of Marah, which looked so tempting from afar, the water proved to be bitter to the taste, and their pain and disappointment were increased a hundred fold. To find that even the thing which had the appearance of a blessing was itself a curse disguised, this was the hardest thing of all to bear. If even the thing which promises to help, itself becomes a hindrance, then the way is dark indeed.

This experience of the children of Israel was perfectly normal. It repeats itself in one form or another in all life. The principle which underlies it may be stated thus: "There is no progress without sacrifice." The blossom on the tree must perish before the fruit can come. The path that leads to the summit of a high mountain is not a pavement. The call of the ideal can never be answered on flowery beds of ease. The law of our growth is the law of sacrifice. Every gain is won through pain. All progress to higher things must be through obstacles and pain and sacrifice.

The deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt meant their deliverance from comparatively easy circumstances into arduous and difficult straits. God led them into the very presence of difficulty. God often does that with His redeemed ones. You must not think that difficulty is a proof that you are wrong. It is most likely an evidence that you are right. Never be daunted by it. Why? It is in order to humble us, to prove us, and to know what is in our hearts that He sends difficulties. There are so many counterfeits that one does not know that he has the real thing until he has tested it. One cannot know the stability of a house until it has been tested by the storm. God puts us into difficulty and lovingly watches us to see how we act. If we stand the test, He says, "Come up higher," and we step up to the wider platform and plateau of usefulness. But if, on the other hand, we cannot stand the test, we step down.

After the Israelites made that long, weary, and monotonous journey through the wilderness, and had grown so thirsty, their long cherished hopes for good water seemed about to be satisfied. Imagine how they ran to the water after they had been deprived of such for three days. The water looked so good to them. But taste did not confirm sight. The water was not palatable, but was bitter. It was not only distasteful but injurious. Had the people drunk it, it would have wrought disease. One can imagine how sorely disappointed the thirsty Israelites were. However, most of life is to most people made up of such disappointments. Intense as are human desires for good, they are doomed, so long as fixed upon created objects, to perpetual and agonizing disappointment.

As might be expected, this keen and poignant disappointment caused the people to murmur, complain and find fault. We read, "The people murmured against Moses." So the greatest services of life are soon forgotten. Instead of saying to Moses, "Thou art our leader, and we will trust thee," the children of Israel turned upon Moses and openly treated him as incapable, if not treacherous. So soon do we forget the great services which have been rendered by our leaders. Moses was the statesman of Israel, yet see how he was treated when he came upon difficulties over which he had no personal control. So they murmured, complained, and found fault. That was an easy thing for them to do. There was no sense in it, no wit in it, and no thought in it. It was more like the cry of a brute than the cry of a man. A murmur is just a double groan. Observe that the murmuring was not ostensibly against God. They murmured against Moses. That is why I say, the greatest services of life are soon forgotten.

This disappointment not only drive the people to murmuring, but it drove Moses to prayer. We read that "Moses cried unto the Lord." Think what Moses might have said under the circumstances. With what indignation he might have answered the murmuring mob. Instead of speaking thus, he cried unto the Lord. So magnanimous prayer is better than official resignation.

As soon as there was a prayer to God, he revealed the remedy. "The Lord showed him a tree." So where there is a bane in life there is always an antidote. This tree which the Lord pointed out was near at hand. Moses took the tree and "cast it into the waters." When that was done BITTER WAS MADE SWEET. The unwholesome mass was changed. "The waters were made sweet." The useless waters were made useful. The remedy was a strange one, but it was most effective. So if we are attentive and obedient to His voice, He will find us remedies for all things that would hurt us. God does not always take away the Marah, but if He does not He will drop an ingredient into it to sweeten its bitterness. For every need God has provided the remedy and supply. There are no limits to the range and operation of His wisdom and power. There is no form of spiritual disease which is incurable to Him.

God can turn bitter to sweet. Often, out of the bitter agony of disappointment God causes gladness to arise. Sometimes, as in the miracle of Marah, He reverses the disappointment itself, turning defeat into victory, giving us the gratification of the desire which had been balked of fruition. But more often He relieves by compensating. He gives something unexpected instead of the expected joy which He has withheld.

Marah led to Elim. If there are times of severe trial in life, there are also "times of refreshing from the Lord" — times of enjoyment, even times of mirth. "Encamped there by the waters" they were allowed to rest for a while, secure from foes, screened from the heat, their eyes charmed by the verdure, their ears soothed by gentle sounds, their every sense lapped in soft enjoyment by the charms of a scene which, after the wilderness, must have appeared "altogether lovely." And so it is in our lives. God does give us, even here in this world, seasons of repose, of satisfaction, and of calm content.

The children of Israel were not going contrary to the experience of the human race when they suffered in the wilderness. For all progress to higher things must be through obstacles and pain and sacrifice.

And when the hard situation comes, there are two ways in which men meet it. They either magnify the bitterness of their experience or they do what they can to make the bitter sweet. To assume the former course means to reach the destination of failure and defeat. Every one who starts to mount in quest of an ideal and then forsakes it in defeat before distressing circumstances is unhappier and less a man by far than he was when the purpose to ascend was first conceived in his heart. For he loses not only his ideal, he loses also the hope with which his goal had sustained him in the past. To cease to aspire means stagnation, and stagnation means death. We all know what it is to see a great good and then turn our backs upon it because we are afraid of the sacrifice and pain and hard work that are necessary for its attainment.

But even worse than magnifying our own troubles is the exaggeration of the difficulties that confront the lives about us. For in discouraging the aims of others, we not only lower ourselves but we drag down those who but for our baneful influence might have climbed to high achievement.

And that brings me to the second attitude we can assume toward a hard situation, whether in our own lives or in the lives of others. It is the attitude which Moses took when he found that the waters at Marah were bitter. "He cried unto the Lord; and the Lord showed him a tree, and he cast it into the waters, and the waters were made sweet." He sweetened the bitter waters. He did not bemoan the situation; He put God into it. He had no power to make the desert a garden. He could not remove all the hardships from the way. But he could and he did make them easier to bear. Without the patience and inspiring presence of Moses, the children of Israel would have perished long before the Promised Land was reached. They would have perished, not because it was impossible to cross the wilderness, but because they magnified their troubles. It was easier for them to murmur than to sing. They owed their sight of Canaan to the fact that there was at least one man among them who could make the bitter waters sweet.

The world is full of sorrow and misfortune and suffering and pain. Despair is always on the threshold somewhere, and the day has never dawned, nor the night fallen, when some one did not cry for a word of cheer and comfort. Man can crave no higher distinction than to have it said of him, "He took away the bitterness of life."

This is one of the most beautiful things about Jesus. The sun always shone brighter and warmer when He was near. It was always easier to be true to the higher things of life when His presence was felt. Joy was always purer and richer when His spirit was there to bless. The brief record of His life pictures Him as one who, wherever He went, left behind Him faces radiant with hope. He always came to do good, and peace and life divine followed in His steps. The ideal to which He looked forward was the time when the will of the Father should be done on earth even as it is done in heaven. He cherished His high purpose warmly in His bosom and with implicit faith in its ultimate fulfillment, He set about to sweeten the waters of life wherever He found them bitter.

Read again the Gospel story and see how largely it consists of a record of helpful activity. In the home, out in the fields, in the market place, out on the lake, in the village, in the city, in the temple, out on the highway, by word and deed, by look and gesture, He was constantly making life easier, more pleasant, more beautiful and more worth while for those with whom He came in contact. He took His own immediate environment and spread the cheer of His presence on that. Let us use all of our influence in making life easier and happier and more worth living for other.