

Marah

by Henry Law

The sermon teaches that Christians will experience bitter times, but ultimately, Jesus can make even the bitterest well sweet.

Scripture: Exodus 15:23, Psalm 34:19, Romans 5:3, James 1:2, 1 Peter 1:6

Topics: "Trials And Faith", "Christian Perseverance"

Description

Henry Law preaches on the story of Israel at Marah, highlighting how even when under God's protection, they faced bitter trials and disappointments. He emphasizes that trials are necessary for faith, hope, and patience to grow, and that believers should expect some bitterness in their journey. Law draws parallels between the bitter waters of Marah and the various challenges believers face in their hearts, in seeking refreshment from within, and in enduring persecution and personal struggles. He encourages believers to turn to Jesus, the 'tree of life,' for healing and relief in every bitter situation, reminding them that Christ can make even the most bitter experiences sweet.

Transcript

When they came to Marah, they could not drink its water because it was bitter. (That is why the place is called Marah.) So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "What are we to drink?" Then Moses cried out to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a piece of wood. He threw it into the water, and the water became sweet. There the Lord made a decree and a law for them, and there he tested them. Exodus 15:23-25

Perhaps joy's bright flame was never brighter than in Israel's sons, when they moved onwards from the marvels of the sea. Slavery's chain was wholly broken. Their foes lay prostrate. The Lord was for them. The Lord was with them. What more could be desired? Can it be, that a people thus guarded, and thus guided, shall find trouble? Where the Lord precedes, can the path be other than the sunny slope of unalloyed delight? True it is, that heavenly leading is always a right way. But true it is, that the right way may be sharp with thorns, and rough with difficulties, and beset with storms. Paul's voyage was ordered, but he was sorely tossed, and barely reached the shore.

This truth is on the forefront of Israel's truth-teaching story. 'They went three days in the wilderness, and found no water.' Here was a sudden check to hope's high tide. They then advanced to Marah. Water there flowed. It was, however, but a mocking stream. The taste was bitter, and they could not drink.

Reader! behold two stages in the Christian journey. A grievous need occurs. A grievous disappointment presses in its rear. But let not such things move you, nor excite surprise. Are you not called to be as a richly-laden tree? Your every branch must bend with fruits of faith and hope and patience. But faith thrives most in trouble's soil. Hope's note is sweetest in the tempest's roar. Patience gains strength beneath the cross's weight. The diamond sparkles because the file is rough. Trials are needful, or they would not be. Trials are needful, therefore they abound. They walk as sisters beside goodness and mercy. They attend the believer, as appointed guards to heaven's gate. No saint sinks in these wholesome waves. But many a thoughtless soul sleeps fatally, because the downy pillow is not shaken. Learn, then, from Marah, to expect some bitter draught.

Next, Marah withdraws a veil, and we can trace the line between a graceless and a gracious heart. The multitude turns from God. Moses flees to Him. One looks to earth and frets. The other looks above and hopes. Believer, let me ask you, why is a throne of grace so near? Why have you open access to it? It is, that burdens may not crush you. It is, that fears may die as soon as born--that doubts may wither as a blighted bud. Mercy and grace are always strewed in rich abundance round it. Faith may take empty vessels and fill them until they overflow. The case of Moses teaches this. He knocks. The door flies open. A ready ear hears. A ready hand supplies. The people's hard and thankless thoughts present no bar. A faithful servant cries. A loving Father grants. 'The Lord showed him a tree, which when he had cast into the waters, the waters were made sweet.'

Reader! learn next, that it is the Lord's wisdom to give relief in the use of means. He whose word called all things out of nothing could in one moment have caused healthful springs to bubble forth. But no. A remedy is announced. Faith must trust. Obedience must comply. Diligence must work. Effort must be up and doing. The poisoned Israelites must look to the uplifted pole. The leprous Naaman must wash in Jordan seven times. The perishing sinner must flee to the crucified Jesus. The needy saint must hasten to the mercy-seat. Sloth's couch is at the gate of hell. Activities and energies scale heaven. Striving enters the strait gate. The fighting warrior receives the prize.

Reader! you are thus prepared to hear, that in following Jesus, your pilgrim-steps will often reach a bitter well. But murmur not. At every Marah there is a tree whose leaves drop sweetness and whose taste is balm. But bear in mind, the eye of faith alone can see it--the hand of faith alone can touch it.

Holy Spirit of the living God, we look to You. Increase our faith. Help us to discern, help us to apply the remedy which grace provides. Shine on this lowly effort to commend the sweetness of the 'plant of renown.' May all who read experience its healing worth!

Let us now take the cases most familiar to each pilgrim's route. The bitterest Marah is bitterness of heart. Each heaven-bound traveler well knows this spot. The downcast Heman pitched his tent beside it. The prolific fountain where these waters spring is an accusing memory. It causes all the past to live again. At its command a train of buried sins appear in frightful freshness. They seem as young as the deeds of yesterday, and hideous as the fiends of darkness. Each tells a tale which cannot be denied. Each points to fiery death as the wages of its work. Each shows an open prison-door. Each shakes the chain of ruin's cell. Well may the stricken conscience quake. A stern voice, also, is heard, 'Can he who sinned these sins have hope of life? Hell's jailer sneers, You will be mine at last!' Who can drink this wormwood and survive?

But sweet relief is near. Jesus, the tree of life, extends His bending branches to the anxious touch. Let the poor sinner boldly shake it. A shower of healing leaves falls thick. Each yields the honey of these honeyed

tidings, 'I, even, I, am He, that blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and will not remember your sins.' 'As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.' When such relief is intermixed, the hateful and bitter taste goes away. The virtue of a Savior's death extracts all poison from the cup.

Another Marah soon appears. The believer is tempted to seek refreshment from some inward source. Then nothing meets him but a brackish pool. What is man's heart, but the loathsome depths of the Dead Sea? Adam's first sin defiled the fountain-head, and poisoned springs give nothing but poisoned streams. Alas! what ceaseless currents of corruptions force their way! Who has not cause to mourn with Paul, 'When I would do good, evil is present with me'? What raging passions, what unruly tempers, what vile desires, what godless thoughts, what vain conceits, pollute our cisterns with their noxious fluid! The best of fallen human nature is a miry ditch.

Is there no help? There is, in the all-sweetening tree! Jesus presents His cure. Welcome the hallowing Savior, and grace will distill from Him, to make each stagnant marsh a rivulet of health. He can create a new heart, and renew a right spirit. He can sanctify wholly. He can preserve pure and blameless. He can work in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure. No Marah is so bitter, as the heart when Christ is absent. No spring is so health-giving as the heart which Christ inhabits.

There is another Marah in the world's biting hate. Enmity still separates the seed of the serpent and the seed of Christ. The race of Ishmael still persecutes the child of promise. Motives are mistaken. Words are distorted. Love for souls is reviled as airs of superiority. To warn of danger seems to boast of self. Zeal for truth is termed a party-strife. To depart from evil is pharisaic pride. This draught is bitter to a tender spirit. But Christ can make it sweet. His arms of love especially embrace His suffering witnesses. The music of His whispers drowns the harsh thunder of the hardest threats. Daniel will tell you that his sweetest night was in the lion's den. The captive children never felt heaven nearer than in the chamber of the flames. Paul never sang more joyously than in the inner prison cell. View, also, the glorious martyrs of our blessed church. They clasped the stake. They reveled in the fires. Jesus was with them. They drank of the bitterest brook. But there was no bitterness therein.

Believer, perhaps you go heavily because of some personal or domestic ordeal. Few are unused to this affliction's gloom. Is it your case, that nights are pain, and the returning light brings langour? Does your frame totter as a reed? Is sickness your consuming guest? This is your Marah. Bitter indeed it is to nature's palate. But I am bold to uplift Jesus, as ready to make even this well all sweet. Failing strength is not a sign of failing interest in a Savior's heart. Lazarus was loved. Yet Lazarus was sick. Feeble may be the cry. But feeble cries are strong to move our sympathizing Savior. His precious cordials will revive the drooping spirit. Can He be present, and joy not sit beside Him? How many languid smiles attest that hours of pain are pledges of the painless heaven!

Perhaps poverty may touch your inventory with withering hand? You once were full; you now are empty. This is your Marah. Who will deny that the trial is most grievous? But experience in God's Word and ways will prove, that this cup may run over in abundance of content. There is no empty coffer to him who sings, 'The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not lack.' Elijah had no bursting barns. But heaven-sent messengers supplied his earliest and his lattermost needs. The faith which finds all things in Christ extracts all gall from poverty.

Do you sit in bereavement's solitude? Is a much-loved form no longer seen? Is a much-loved voice no longer heard? This is your Marah. The cup is bitter. But Jesus's comforts blossom most, when earthly flowers die. He lives, and lives to heal your weeping wounds. Ask the mourning widow of Nain who changed her sorrow into joy. Ask the disconsolate sisters of Bethany who dried their tears. The quick reply is--Jesus. Has He ceased to pity? Can His tenderness grow hard? It cannot be. His presence can fill, and more than fill each void.

Reader! there is another Marah. The brink of it is at your feet. Another step may reach the stream of death. The waters here seem often to be very bitter. But Jesus has efficacy to make them sweet. Approach, then, leaning on His arm, trusting in His cross, hidden in His wounds, covered by His righteousness, and you will find the taste be all joy. The bitterness of death is sin unpardoned. But the blood which takes away all sin, takes out all poison.

When you have passed this brook, all Marahs are behind you. But what is the ocean which now stretches onward and onward, without limit, without shore? It is the heaven of God's pleasures. It is the ocean of God's glory. The redeemed drink forever. And as they drink, the depth seems deeper, and the sweetness sweeter.

Reader! are you a stranger to a Savior's grace? If so, your dwelling now is always at a Marah's side. Your daily well holds the bitter water of vanity, vexation, sorrow, disappointment, discontent. Time bears you swiftly to the final stage. What then? There is the cup of trembling and of wrath. Your hands must take it. Your mouth must drink. But you can never drain it. There is no last drop. Infinite vengeance ever fills it to the brim. Eternal wrath is ever bringing more. The merciless tormentor, with unwearied savageness, presents it to the lips.

Reader! think of the rich man and his uncooled tongue. Think of the redeemed. 'The Lamb, who is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them to living fountains of waters.'

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