

## **The Waters of Marah**

There is a wonderful lesson and some interesting perspectives to be savored in Exodus chapter 15 verses 23-26 if we will but pause and muse on this one small episode that took place very shortly after the Israelites had crossed the Red Sea. This occurred just three days after the children of Israel left Pharaoh's army drowning in that sea. They had been all this time without water when they came to what must have been a spring fed stream or pond they later called Marah which means bitter. Three days without water must have caused them to be desperately thirsty and ready to drink just about anything. However, when they sought to drink from this water they found it far too bitter, even in these dire circumstances. Let us read those verses:

*“23 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. 24 And the people murmured against Moses, saying, What shall we drink? 25 And he cried unto the Lord; and the Lord showed 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, 26 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.”*

We learn that they “murmured” against Moses. Let us consider this for a moment. We know from subsequent events, that had not something alleviating happened very quickly, this murmuring would have soon turned into a lynch mob, or more in keeping with those times, a stoning mob. Sufficient trust in the Lord had not entered their hearts. Not much of Egypt had been removed. They yet lacked faith in the Lord, even though they had just witnessed the miracles of the ten plagues, the parting of the waters that through God's mercy allowed them to escape certain slaughter. As they looked back, they saw God's wrath descend on those who had sought to destroy them. So what should that tell us? It tells us what many later and similar examples try to tell us, that true faith does not result

from witnessing miracles, no matter how great or how clearly evident they may be presented. Faith comes from recognizing who God is, of what He is capable, as evidenced by His creation, and realizing that His love, mercy and eternal presence are available to all who really seek and obey Him. Because Satan, the fallen angels, and the demons all have “miracle making powers,” we must be very discerning as to the source of what we perceive as miracles.

We must always keep in mind that behind every pagan idol there is a demon who's expressed supernatural powers provide the basis for worship of these hunks of wood. Then through Moses' prayers, God showed him a tree that if cast into the water would make the water sweet. I believe the tree itself was no more the actual cause of the sweetening than was the mud itself that Jesus put over the eyes of the blind man to cause him to see. I believe it was God's way of using natural things where appropriate to provide a seemingly natural expression of His miracles. Perhaps there may have been some mitigating substance in the tree sap, and there may have been some beneficial ointment in the mud. However, without divine intervention of a supernatural kind, neither would have been sufficiently effectual in such a short period of time.

Let us look at these “waters of Marah.” As we read about the Israelites 40 years in the wilderness, we tend to forget, or at least not fully retain or appreciate the significance of all that went on in terms of its magnitude. Scripture records that there were about six hundred thousand men along with an unnumbered population of women and children. When God decreed that all men twenty years of age and older would die in the wilderness, we might conclude that all those under twenty, at that time at least, were considered children. Therefore, there must have been considerably more women and children than there were men. Most students of Scripture conclude that the total population could have conservatively been well over two and half million.

If we assume that there was a total of only two million and they each removed only one gallon of water as their initial ration, they would have drained an amount of water greater than the capacity of 150 average swimming pools. If we increase this by another half

million and add in the needs of their livestock, that amount could easily doubled as a daily minimum requirement. That was hardly a pool or a simple spring. It had to be a spring-fed lake, and one that had to replenish itself very rapidly in order to supply their needs as they remained there, or as they withdrew a supply for traveling. The amount here estimated does not account for the needs of herds of sheep and cattle, or for cooking and cleaning. The waters of Marah had to be, as noted, a lake there in this arid wilderness absent of streams or rivers.

Just to add another perspective to its likely size, if the six hundred thousand men, and only them, no woman and children or animals, all assembled at the same time along the shore in order to dip out a bucketful, it would have to have had a shore line at least six miles long! Given the size of this body of water, assuming the tree actually had some therapeutic effect, the natural rate at which it could have done the job would have taken many weeks and much circulation of it or of the waters around it. The miracle wasn't simply the sweetening but the size and very existence of such waters. There is no lake in this region today. I believe that God created the lake supernaturally for one specific purpose, after which He removed it and restored the original topography.

As we muse about this, let us also remember the rushing waters that burst forth later when Moses struck the rock. Try to imagine the logistics of that situation as well, and how such a vast multitude was able to physically get at that water source. It also must have somehow formed a lake of similar size.

Verse 27 casually tells us that after Marah, they came to Elim where there were 12 wells. If there were wells, then someone must have dug them and done so for a fairly large settlement of people. Where were they? The word for wells is "ayin" which is better translated here as springs. Wells could not have served the needs as we have seen, unless they overflowed to create a lake or a series of 12 very large ponds. As with Marah, these must have been huge rapidly rich raging artesian springs from a deep aquifer that spilled out and fed a perched water table in which the lake or ponds were located. This unusually high water table would explain the 60 palm trees and a large source of water.

And while we are considering such logistics, consider the magnitude of the sewage problem that had to be dealt with in this large two plus million “tent city” of people.

This may in part be why God had them move from place to place for 38 years. In examining only this one issue regarding water and sewerage let us not fail to appreciate the magnitude and complexity of the many other municipal type” issues that had to be dealt with to sustain this huge wandering city. It involved far more than the innovative skills that any group of men could have possibly devised, and it continued to function for 40 years. It was a miracle raised to the tenth power of miracles. Even with today’s most advanced technology, this would be impossible without the continuous importation of massive amounts of supplies and materials. God’s miracles took care of everything they needed from manna, to doves, to shoes that never wore out.

Of what significance is there to these four little verses found in Exodus 15? Perhaps there is far more than our casual reading is likely to reveal, and that it even goes beyond these above noted practical considerations. This appears in Scripture as a comparatively minor event in the context of what is described regarding their many years of wandering. However, because it is there in Scripture it is important for our learning, as we should always remember. If it wasn’t, God would not have given it to us. In this regard, perhaps God is prompting us to recognize this as a symbolic expression of what we might consider as our own Marahs as we move through life. How often as we wade through life do we enter into unknown waters that seem good, and then we find them intolerably bitter? We too pass through Marahs and find that only through the grace of God are these waters sweetened sufficiently that we can survive and move on.

It was not by their faith that the Israelites were saved. It was through the faith and prayers of Moses that God, in His love and faithfulness, heard and removed the bitterness. We don’t have Moses as our intercessor, but there is One infinitely greater, our Intercessor, our Lord and Savior, Christ Jesus. For those who place their faith in Him, He is the Vine, the Rock, the Truth, and the Sweet Waters that forever can quench our thirst as well as deliver us to the Promised Land. I have experienced numerous “Marahs” as I spent the

biggest part of 70 years in wilderness before I was shown the Promised Land and was invited in. We must each first experience that bitterness, and then cry to the Lord in prayer, submitting to Him in faith and obedience. To this observation it is exceedingly appropriate to add this surely inspired commentary by C.I. Scofield:

*These bitter waters were in the very path of the Lord's leading, and stand for the trials of God's people, which are educatory and not punitive. The "tree" is the cross (Galatians 3:13), which became sweet to Christ as the expression of the Father's will (John 18:2). When our Marahs are so taken we cast the "tree" into the waters (Romans 5:3, 4).*

What becomes ours through such faith? It is Jehovah-Raphi! *"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"* (Exodus 15:26). He is the Lord who makes all things right. Who heals all things!

This was the message given at Marah that expressed the purpose of the event. It gave them, and us, an illustration of His mighty, majesty and power, His attentiveness and His love. The message in verse 26 here given was in advance of Mt Sinai and the Law. It expresses the essential and basic covenant between God and man. It's God's promise of continued blessings, such as health and healing in exchange for man's obedience. The Hebrew word that is used here for disease is only used once in Scripture. Its meaning is broader than this. It can encompass "infirmities" being, pain, griefs, wounds, etc. As we all see, the message is simple enough for a young child to understand, yet impossible even for the strongest most dedicated man of faith to live by. Blessed are we of faith however, for we have a Savior who cleansed away our sins with His blood, and that changes our nature giving us the power to overcome so that our souls need not continue in the bitterness of Marah.