

Hugo Bouter

Walking with God in the wilderness

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

Exodus 15:22-27

The first wilderness experiences after the exodus

After Israel had been led out of Egypt, they sang across the Red Sea the song of Moses, the song of redemption, and they shouted with joy (Ex. 15:1-18). The Israelites had been delivered from their slavery; God had been good for them. It was understandable that they sang a song of praise. In that song, they were also talking about the Promised Land they would inherit, and the sanctuary God would establish there. But unfortunately it was not yet that far; first the journey through the wilderness awaited.

In the wilderness they were to serve God, as Moses had already announced to Pharaoh: "Let My people go, that they may serve Me in the wilderness (...). We will go three days' journey into the wilderness and sacrifice to the LORD our God as He will command us" (Ex. 7:16; 8:27-28). However, we read nothing of this in Exodus 15. Indeed, they went through the wilderness for three days, but they did not get

around to offering sacrifices. That only happened later at Mount Sinai (Ex. 18:12; 24:3vv). Neither at Marah nor at Elim was there any mention of sacrifices. On the contrary, we see here a complaining people. The song of praise was hushed, for they found no water in the wilderness.

That was the first "wilderness experience," the first difficult lesson God's people had to learn on the journey to Canaan. The wilderness is the land of death. It is a barren and thirsty land, without water (Ps. 63:2). It is a picture of the world as the place which has nothing to offer to the Christian, the place where we are tested (or: "tempted"). In the wilderness we learn who we are in our weakness, but also that we have a mighty God (Deut. 8:2-4). There we learn obedience to God and faith in God. There the believer's soul thirsts for God, yes, even his body longs for Him. We learn here to expect everything from heavenly resources. God Himself provides His people in the wilderness with food and drink: the bread from heaven and the water from the rock. With Him we can find our way through the barren wilderness. In addition to the manna, there were the quails, for God gave them meat to eat in the evening and plenty of bread in the morning.

In connection with the manna, we also find the institution of the Sabbath (Ex. 16). This has a deep prophetic and spiritual significance. There remains therefore a rest for the people of God (cf. Heb. 4:9). Later we find the waters of contention at Massah and Meribah, as well as the battle with Amalek (Ex. 17:7ff.).

An overview of Exodus 15-17

These were the first wilderness experiences of the people of Israel after the exodus from Egypt, according to the account of Exodus 15, 16 and 17. We also find here some further revelations concerning the name of the Lord (Ex. 15:26; 17:15). These experiences also have a great deal to say to us as New Testament believers, as they include:

1. the song of redemption, and of deliverance (cf. Rom. 8);
2. the manna, the bread from heaven (John 6);
3. the hidden manna before the Lord (Rev. 2:17);
4. the rest of the Sabbath which remains for the people of God (Heb. 4:9);
5. the water from the rock (1 Cor. 10:4);
6. the battle against the flesh (Gal. 5:16ff.);
7. the heavenly priesthood of Christ, our great High Priest (Heb. 4:14-10:22).

God's people are also now on a journey through this world. We are on our way to a better, that is, a heavenly country. We find the parallels with Israel especially in Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians and Hebrews. Try to elaborate on this for yourself. After the experiences with God in the wilderness, we meet the Israelites at the mountain of God, Mount Sinai. There He revealed Himself more fully to His people, made His covenant with them and gave them His laws and statutes (Ex. 18-24). Here also they prepared the tabernacle, a portable sanctuary for the God of Israel (Ex. 25-40). This also has much to say to us as believers in connection with the building up of the church in our day and age.

Marah

As already mentioned, the first experience was that Israel wandered in the wilderness without finding water. The second was the water of Marah, which they could not drink. The bitter waters became sweet as soon as Moses threw a piece of wood, a tree, into it. What a disappointing experience this must have been for the Israelites: when they finally found water after three day's journey, it turned out to be bitter and they could not drink it! Marah (meaning "bitterness," cf. Ruth 1:20) derived its name from this: "They could not drink the waters of Marah, for they were bitter. Therefore the name of it was called Marah" (Ex. 15:23).

What a disappointment it is also for us when the "wells" from which we think we may drink turn out to be bitter! Marah was actually the first real test for them during the wilderness journey. The people failed and murmured against Moses. Thus God brought to light what was in their hearts: the principle of rebellion against Him and their leader Moses (Ex. 15:24). Murmuring is one of the worst sins there is. In Paul's admonitions to the Corinthians, it is the last in a list of five serious failures of Israel during the wilderness journey (1 Cor. 10:10).

The Lord who heals you

This shows the importance of the principle of obedience during the test: we must listen attentively to the voice of God, and incline our ear to His commandments, and keep all His statutes. If that is the result of the test, then all is well. Then we experience the healing power of the Lord in the midst of difficulties. Then we realize that He is our Savior, our Healer. This is one of the familiar proper names of God: "I

am the LORD who heals you" (Ex. 15:25-26). A few chapters later we encounter another: "The LORD is my Banner" (Ex. 17:15).

God's promise then is that He will not impose on us any of the diseases that He imposed on the Egyptians – the people of this world. As believers, then, we are the great exception in the midst of a world without God, as was the case with the redeemed people of Israel. The diseases, the plagues of Egypt, speak prophetically of the judgments yet to come upon the world during the Great Tribulation. The last book of the Bible shows some striking similarities with the plagues that came upon Egypt.

We recall that during the first plague the water was turned to blood, so that the Egyptians could not drink the water from the Nile (Ex. 7:14-25). In the end time, the water will also become undrinkable. The waters will be bitter: the springs of life will turn into bitter waters of death. Indeed, the third trumpet judgment is that a great star falls from heaven on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water. The name of the star is Wormwood; curiously, this also means "bitter". And a third of the waters then became wormwood; and many men died from the water, because it was made bitter (Rev. 8:10-11).

What then is the remedy, the cure for the bitter waters? How can we escape the plagues of Egypt? It is significant that the Lord pointed out to Moses a piece of wood, a part of a tree. Exactly the same word is used in Deuteronomy 21 in connection with the penalty of death by hanging on a tree: "(...) but you shall surely bury him that day. For he who is hanged is accursed of God" (Deut. 21:22-23). Paul's famous quote in the letter to the Galatians is taken from this passage: "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*" (Gal. 3:13). So the connection with the cross is obvious. Christ Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree (1 Pet. 2:24).

But we should not think only of the significance of the cross (important as that is), but equally of the Person of the Lord Himself. After all, shortly before the crucifixion, the Lord Jesus called Himself "the green wood" (Luke 23:31). When we interpret the wood here typologically, we are talking about "Jesus Christ and Him crucified," to use Paul's words (1 Cor. 2:2). His Person and His finished work on the cross of Calvary: that is the cure for every ailment, for every plague. Jesus Christ and Him crucified was, among other things, the remedy for the wrong situation in which the Corinthians found themselves, and also for the error to which the Galatians surrendered. For to them, too, Jesus Christ had been portrayed before

their eyes as *crucified* (Gal. 3:1). To Him they had to turn again, to Him they had to be brought back in real communion.

The wood cast into the bitter waters made the waters sweet. Thus it became drinkable. Similarly, the thought of Christ's suffering makes bitter things in our lives acceptable. Nothing can separate us from the love of God, which He has shown in the surrender of His beloved Son. And nothing can separate us from the love of Christ, which He demonstrated in giving His life on the cross. Indeed, the LORD is our Savior, our Healer. But there was no cheap solution to our need, to our bitter misery. Christ had to become Man and lay down His life for us in order to give us eternal life.

Elim

After Marah followed the oasis of Elim (meaning terebinth trees, or palms). In Elim Israel drank abundantly of the water of life: "(...) there were twelve wells of water and seventy palm trees; so they camped there by the waters" (Ex. 15:27). Here the flock of God was led beside the still waters and made to lie down in green pastures (Ps. 23:2). It is a fullness of benefits that God shows to His people. What a great contrast to Marah! Here in this oasis we find rich blessings:

1. no fewer than twelve springs to drink from, that is, a well for every tribe;
2. the shade and protection from the heat of the day by means of seventy palm trees;
3. a safe resting place by the waters ("He leads me beside the still waters," Ps. 23:2).

Everything speaks of God's care for His people. Everything attests to His perfect order and rest. We find the numbers twelve and seventy in connection with both Israel and the church. Just as there were twelve founding fathers for Israel, there were twelve apostles for the church. They laid the foundation of the church (Eph. 2:20). There were seventy elders who were prominent in Israel (Ex. 24:1). Later on they had the Sanhedrin, which consisted of seventy members plus the high priest.

In the New Testament we find twelve apostles sent out by Christ, but later on followed the mission of the seventy (Luke 10:1). We still stand on the foundation laid by the apostles of Christ. We still draw upon the resources they left us in the inspired Word of God. We still camp there by the waters. The water of life continues to flow for all those who believe. We also still rest in the safe protection of the "seventy palm trees": the elders and the many gifts we have received from our

glorified Lord (Eph. 4:7ff.). Elim: this oasis in the wilderness is, so to speak, a foretaste of the Promised Land, and of the heavenly rest.

