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 15:22-23,27 NKJV

The First Wilderness Experiences After The Exodus

After Israel had been led out of Egypt having crossed the Red Sea, they sang the song of Moses, of redemption, and they shouted with joy (vv.1-18). The Israelites had been delivered from their slavery; God had been good. It was fitting for them to sing a song of praise, and in it they talked about the Promised Land they would inherit and the sanctuary God would establish there. But, first, their journey through the wilderness waited.

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" (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 (18:12, 24:4-5). 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 difficult lesson God's people had to learn on the journey to Canaan: the wilderness is a place of death. It is a barren and thirsty land, without water (Ps. 63:1). A picture of the world, it has nothing to offer to the Christian. It is the place where we are tested. 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 Him. There the believer's soul thirsts for God; yes, even his body longs for Him. We learn to expect everything from heavenly resources. God Himself provides His people with food and drink: the bread from heaven and the water from the rock (see John 6:32-35; 1 Cor. 10:4). With Him we can pass 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, for "there remains therefore a rest for the people of God" (Heb. 4:9). Then, Exodus 17 tells of the waters of contention at Massah and Meribah, and the battle with Amalek.

An Overview Of Exodus 15–17

These chapters reveal the first wilderness experiences of the people of Israel. We also find here some further revelations concerning the name of the LORD (Ex. 15:26, 17:15). Their experiences have a great deal to say to us as New Testament believers, as they include:

1. The song of redemption and of deliverance (consider 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. 5:16);
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" (11:16). We find parallels with Israel, especially in Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians and Hebrews, and we encourage you to look into this more 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). They prepared the tabernacle, a portable sanctuary for the God of Israel (Ex. 25-40). This has much to say to us as believers regarding the building up of the Church.

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. What a disappointing experience this must have been for the Israelites. They finally found water after three days' journey and it turned out to be bitter! Marah, meaning "bitterness" (see 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). The bitter waters, however, became sweet as soon as Moses threw a tree the LORD had selected into them (v. 25).

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 – rebellion against Him and their leader Moses (v. 24). Complaining, or 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 obedience as we pass through this world. We must listen attentively to the voice of God, do what is right in His sight, incline our ear to His commandments, and keep all His statutes (Ex. 15:26). If we do, then all is well. We experience the healing power of the Lord, as He applies it, 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" (v. 26), also known as

Jehovah-Rapha. A few chapters later we encounter another special name: "The LORD is my Banner" (17:15), or Jehovah-Nissi.

In Exodus we see God's promise that He will not impose on His people any of the diseases that He did on the Egyptians – the people of this world. As believers, then, we are the great exception in 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. For example, we recall that during the first plague the water was turned to blood, so the Egyptians could not drink the water from the Nile (Ex. 7:14-25). In the end time, after the rapture of the Church, 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 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. 8:11).

What 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 tree. Exactly the same word is used in Deuteronomy 21 in connection with the penalty of death by hanging on a tree. We read of that man: "you shall surely bury him that day … For he who is hanged is accursed of God" (v. 23). Paul's quote in the letter to the Galatians 3:13 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')." The connection with the cross is obvious. Christ "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 Jesus. After all, shortly before the crucifixion the Lord called Himself "the green wood" (Luke 23:31). We interpret the "wood" here typologically, meaning 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 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 tree cast into the bitter waters made the waters sweet. Thus they 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" (Rom. 8:39), which He has shown in the surrender of His beloved Son. And nothing can "separate us from the love of Christ" (v. 35), 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 the people came to the oasis of Elim, meaning terebinth trees, or palms. "There were twelve wells of water and seventy palm trees; so they camped there by the waters" (Ex. 15:27), and surely Israel drank abundantly of the water of life. 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 12 springs to drink from, that is, a well for every tribe;
2. Shade and protection from the heat of the day by means of seventy palm trees; and
3. A safe resting place by the waters.

Everything speaks of God's care for His people and attests to His perfect order and rest. We find the numbers 12 and 70 in connection with both Israel and the Church. Just as there were 12 founding fathers for Israel, there were 12 apostles for the Church who laid its foundation (Eph. 2:20). There were 70 elders who were prominent in Israel (Ex. 24:1), and later on they had the Sanhedrin, which consisted of seventy members plus the high priest. In the New Testament we find 12 apostles sent out by Christ, and it was followed by the mission of the 70 (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 who believe. We also still rest in the safe protection of the "seventy palm trees" (Ex. 15:27) – the elders and the many "gifts" we have received from our glorified Lord (Eph. 4:7). Elim, an oasis in the wilderness, was a foretaste to Israel of the Promised Land, and to the Church it is prophetic of our heavenly rest.

Online uitgeverij
OudeSporen