

DRINKING FROM THE BITTER WATERS

James McAlister

By many miracles, God delivered Israel out of Egypt and across the Red Sea. Immediately thereafter, they were three days in the wilderness without water. When they did find at Marah the water they had desperately sought, it was bitter (Exodus 15:22-25). How would they respond to this disappointment?

Not understanding this test from God, they grumbled at Moses, "What shall we drink?" As captives, cruel taskmasters had driven them for 400 years. Now they would have to learn to be led in order to survive. And the first place God took them was to bitter water in a barren wilderness. Moses cried out to God, who did yet another mighty work by making the bitter water sweet.



Israel eventually moved on to Elim, where there were 12 springs of water and 70 date palms. This was assuredly a pleasant place to camp, for the water must have been sweet and refreshing. But there is no record of any great work of God being done at Elim.

According to Charles Spurgeon, "The Lord gets His best soldiers out of the highlands of affliction." Affliction is just another name for bitter water.

Puritan Samuel Rutherford's thought is compelling: "If God had told me some time ago that He was about to make me as happy as I could be in this world, and then had told me that He should begin by crippling me in all my limbs, and removing me from all my usual sources of enjoyment, I should have thought it a very strange mode of accomplishing His purpose. And yet, how is His wisdom manifest even in this! For if you should see a man shut up in a closed room, idolizing a set of lamps and rejoicing in their light, and you wished to make him truly happy, you would begin by

blowing out all his lamps, and then throw open the shutters to let in the light of heaven."

As I write this today, I reflect on the bitter waters of my own life. I recall first tasting them at the birth of our daughter, Jenny, the child expectant parents pray not to have. Blind and profoundly retarded, she set us on a course we would never have chosen. But at the bitter waters we found the immense blessing God had poured out for us there. Then Jenny's unexpected death 22 years later compelled us to drink again—and for our good.

Today we're poised beside the bitter waters once again, seeking treatment for a rare form of cancer at the M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston. Another difficult path not of our choosing.

But the question arises: Would we be used of God? Then we should expect Him to repeatedly lead us to bitter water. In such times will we grumble, or will we cry out for Him to make even that noxious water sweet? I'm ashamed to say that I have a secret desire to "camp at Elim" and (as Isaac Watts wrote) "be carried to the skies on flow'ry beds of ease, while others fought to win the prize and sailed through bloody seas."

Assuredly, God will not throw open the shutters to flood us with the light of heaven until He first "blows out our lamps" by leading us to bitter water.

I am sure that what we are suffering now cannot compare with the glory that will be shown to us.

Romans 8:18

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