

ESF, Lord's day service message
3/13/2016

Turing Bitter Trials into Sweet Blessings
Exodus 15:22-27

²² Then Moses led Israel from the Red Sea and they went into the Desert of Shur. For three days they traveled in the desert without finding water.

²³ When they came to Marah, they could not drink its water because it was bitter. (That is why the place is called Marah. ²⁴ So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "What are we to drink?" ²⁵ 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.

²⁵ There the Lord made a decree and a law for them, and there he tested them. ²⁶ He said, "If you listen carefully to the voice of the Lord your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the Lord, who heals you."

²⁷ Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs and seventy palm trees, and they camped there near the water.

A lot of things in life have the potential to make us bitter. Family problems, job stress, past failures, conflicts, financial difficulties and so on. The list could go on forever. All of these have the potential to make us bitter. Bitterness negatively effects our thinking, our emotions, our relationship with others and our relationship with God. But if we overcome it, it can be an open door to blessings.

In a famous study by Victor and Mildred Goertzel, entitled Cradles of Eminence, the home backgrounds of 300 highly successful people were investigated. They were men and women whose names everyone would recognize as brilliant in their fields, such as Franklin D. Roosevelt, Helen Keller, Winston Churchill, Albert Schweitzer, Gandhi, Einstein. The intensive investigation into their early home lives yielded some

surprising findings:

* Three fourths of the children were troubled either by poverty, by a broken home, or by rejecting, or dominating parents.

* 74 of 85 writers of fiction or drama and 16 of the 20 poets came from homes where, as children, they saw tense psychological drama played out by their parents.

* Physical handicaps such as blindness, deafness, or crippled limbs characterized over one-fourth of the sample.

So, the question of how to turn bitter trials into sweet blessings is not how we can avoid difficult trials but how we can overcome them.

In today's message, we will learn the best way to turn bitter trials ~~in lives~~ into sweet blessings.

Believe that blessings are not far from trials

The nation of Israel began their journey in great spirits. The Red Sea was divided and yielded a road for them to cross over. The best soldiers of their archenemy, Pharaoh, were drowned in the Red Sea. They praised the Lord for his great act of deliverance: "*Your right hand, O Lord, was majestic in power. Your right hand, O Lord, shattered the enemy*" (Ex 15:6). Their praise continued: "*In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed. In your strength you will guide them to your holy dwelling*" (Ex 15:13). What they praised was true - God did love them; he would guide them.

However, they got in big trouble soon after they crossed the Red Sea. They had to travel in the desert of Shur for three days without any water. They became extremely thirsty. Then they found an oasis. We can imagine their relief when in the distance they spotted an oasis or a well. Their hopes rose high. They thought that the Lord provided what they needed finally. They hurried to the water. They scooped the water to quench their thirst, but the water was bitter. It was undrinkable. At that point, the joyful celebration of triumph that happened three days ago

turned into the bitterness of disappointment. They called the place “Marah” which means bitter.

They were unable to endure extreme thirst any longer. They started grumbling. While they were grumbling, they got more bitter and tired.

But, they should have known that such a bitter trial was a necessary part of their journey to the land of promise.

To overcome bitterness caused by trials, we must understand that trials are common to all. There is no believer who is exempted from trials. God allows all of us to experience “Marah.” But “Marah” was not their final destination. It was just one place they had to pass by while God was leading them to the land of promise.

So, Peter encourages us with this word in 1 Peter 4:12-13: *Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.*

While we follow God’s will, we must expect that there may be bitter trials in our lives. Difficulties and setbacks may come after blessings. We feel disappointed and discouraged when life’s broad highway suddenly changes into a stony pathway, and bitterness comes to our lives. However, if we believe that through trials, we can participate in the sufferings of Christ and in his glory, we can endure it more patiently.

After they experienced the severe trial in Marah, God brought them to another place called “Elim.” Elim was about 7 miles away from Marah. It was a wonderful oasis in the desert. It had many trees for shade and plenty of clean water to drink. God showed them that there would be not only Marah but Elim, not only bitter trials in their life journey but also sweet blessings.

When the Israelites suffered from the trial at Marah they didn't know that the oasis of Elim was only 7 miles away. If they had known it was but several hours walking distance, they wouldn't have made so much fuss. This is usually the case when God deals with our trials. Yes, there are difficulties, but times of comfort and peace are seldom far away.

If you feel or think that there are only bitter trials in your life, you have to know that such feelings or thoughts are not from the Lord, but from the devil. When you keep your faith in the Lord in times of trials, he will surely bring sweet blessings. Believe that there are not only Marahs but also Elims. Seek Elims. Dream Elims. Expect Elims.

Although we are passing through bitter trials in life, when we obey God, he brings us "Elims." Even when God allows you to go through bitter experiences choose to obey him in anticipation of the good times ahead. There will be an Elim experience of sweet times ahead, if you will only trust and obey Him.

Weeping may last for a night, but a shout of joy will come in the morning. Be willing to obey the Lord's word when you pass through the trials of bitterness, so God may promote you to sweeter places of usefulness.

Give thanks to God in all circumstances

Thanksgiving is the best way to overcome bitter trials. Grumbling does not solve any problem at all. It always makes matters worse. If we grumble when we are facing trials in life, bitterness will overtake our hearts. That is why Paul encourages us in all circumstances not to grumble. 1 Corinthians 10:10-11 says, "*And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel. These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come.*"

If the Israelites had chosen not to complain but to give thanks to God in such a trial, they would have received encouragement, joy and strength from God in the trial.

The best way to overcome bitterness is to give thanks to God in all circumstances. A thanksgiving spirit will drive out bitterness from our hearts and brings us peace and comfort. Philippians 2:13-14 says, *“for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose. Do everything without complaining or arguing,”*

How can we give thanks to God even in such harsh circumstance?

First, if we see something positive in our difficult trials, we can be thankful.

Three days is a very long time to go without water. The temperature in the upper Sinai Peninsula ranges from 82 to 98 degrees Fahrenheit in the summer. A person in the shade may survive several days without water at such high temperatures. The Israelites, however, were not in the shade and they were on the verge of dangerous levels of dehydration - nevertheless they were alive! If they had thought about the amazing fact that they were still alive in such a condition, they would have been thankful.

Although we may go through difficult situations like a desert, there is always something positive in our lives. Try to see the positive side and give thanks to God for it.

Second, if we believe that God uses trials to discipline us to grow in faith, we can be thankful.

God uses trials to discipline us to be patient and strong. By trials God disciplines us to depend upon him alone in all circumstances. So James says in James 1:2-4, *“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith*

develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”

Third, if we remember the marvelous things which the Lord has done for us, we can be thankful.

The Israelites should remember that God set them free from slavery under the power of Egyptian king miraculously. They should remember that God divided the water of the Red Sea and enabled them to walk through the sea. Remembering what the Lord had done for them could have helped them to depend on his goodness even in such circumstances and to give thanks to him. They should think, “If God has delivered us with such super natural miracles in the past, why will he not deliver us again through other miracles?” Then they would have given thanks to God.

After they traveled forty years in the desert, Moses encouraged them to remember the Lord who guided them, provided for them, and protected them in the desert: “*Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands*” (Deuteronomy 8:2).

When a bitter trial comes to your life and the devil provokes you to grumble and get depressed, remember the miraculous blessings which the Lord has brought to your life. And you can give thanks to God and overcome the bitterness. The Lord will fill your heart with joy and peace.

Seek God’s deliverance

When people were grumbling in bitterness and complaining against Moses, Moses did not know what to do and got into much trouble. He became really bitter too. He was tempted to grumble as they did. He was tempted to yell at the grumbling people.

But instead of grumbling or yelling, he sought God's deliverance. And God provided a solution: ... *and the Lord showed him a piece of wood. He threw it into the water, and the water became sweet.* By crying out to God, Moses was able to overcome bitterness and receive God's miraculous solution to the bitterness. That's what hard times can do for us.

We can see many examples in the Bible of how believers receive God's solution to turn bitter trials into sweet blessings through their prayers.

When Hannah was bitter without a child she prayed. 1 Sam. 1:10-17

When Elisha was in great need he prayed. 2 Kings 4:18-37

When Hezekiah was in trouble he immediately went to prayer. Isaiah 37:14

When Daniel was threatened he prayed. Daniel 6:10-11

When Peter was in prison the church prayed. Acts 12:5

When Jesus was in bitter Gethsemane, He prayed. Matthew 26: 36-46

This is the way of victory. This is the way to overcome. With prayer, we can trade our sorrows for the joy of the Lord. When we seek God, God always has a way of turning the bitter trials into sweet blessings. While we are praying to God, we receive peace, comfort, forgiveness of our sins, and grace to forgive others. While we are praying to God, God gets rid of our bitterness.

When a bitter trial oppresses you to give up on hope, don't surrender yourself to the bitterness, but surrender yourself to God in prayer. Then God will surely deliver you from the bitter trial and bring you a sweet blessing.