

Text: Exod. 15:22-27

Title: "The truth about our troubles"

Time: 12/27/2020 am

Place: NBBC

Introduction: Perhaps more so than any other year I have been alive, I have heard many sighs of relief that the year 2020 is finally over. It seems that if ever we needed a New Year, it is after the year we have just endured.

To one degree or another, every year is a year that the world is happy to see come to an end. There is great fanfare on New Year's Day - lots of celebration and singing - but that quickly wears off, and by the time we get to December 27th, we are glad that the year we celebrated 361 days ago has finally ended.

For the Israelites of our passage, that same kind of turn-around from rejoicing to complaining only took three days. They were three difficult days - a waterless journey away from the Red Sea into the wilderness (v. 22). Finally, they come on a source of water, only to find it completely undrinkable (v. 23).

As I wrote that line in my sermon notes, it occurred to me that I felt a little dehydrated, so I reached behind me for a bottle of Chrystal Geyser Natural Alpine Spring Water recently purchased at Market Basket and drank down a refreshing swig of that water. A bit later, my son Kent wandered into my study and grabbed a bottle for himself.

As easy as it is for me to criticize the Israelites for their poor reaction in this passage, it is hard for me to imagine what it must have been like to journey for three days in the north-west wilderness of the Sinai Peninsula without water. I

have never been quite that thirsty before. And then to be that thirsty and come to find undrinkable water seems only to mock the Israelites' sad state-of-affairs.

But although I have never experienced the extreme thirst described by this passage, I certainly do know what it is like to face troubles that tempt me to murmur and complain. You know what that is like as well. Dealing with the temptation that caused Israel to sin in this passage is an important challenge for our own hearts and lives. Often it does not even take us three days. We can sing God's praises on Sunday morning and then spend the rest of the Lord's Day with our flesh complaining about all the trouble we find ourselves in. It can happen that quickly to us as well.

So, what is to be done about our sinful flesh's natural reaction to the troubles we face? Our passage teaches us that the key to victory over the temptation to complain about our troubles is wrapped up in understanding an important truth about them, what our passage calls a relevant *statute* and *ordinance* (v. 25b). I want us to focus on that truth together this morning as we study the passage under the theme, "The truth about our troubles," so that we can have victory over our complaining flesh when we face them. There are two parts to the truth we find here.

I. Our enemy wants to use our trouble to destroy us (v. 24).

Illustration: Some great work has been done recently on the geography of the journey from the crossing of the Red Sea to Sinai. This section of Exodus along with Numbers 33 are the key passages. The first two locations on that journey are mentioned in our passage – Marah with its bad water (v. 23) and Elim with its twelve springs and seventy date-palms (v. 27).

Egyptologist David Rohl believes that Marah is a site called Wadi el-Mura, which is home to a well that the Arabs call "Bitter Well." It is called that because the water of that well is extremely brackish – bitter tasting from salt and other minerals. He then believes that Elim is a site just south of there that is still today called "The Springs of Moses" – Ayun Musa. Egyptologist Gregory Mumford has concluded that Ayun Musa "once had twelve artesian wells rising from an underground aquifer, and scores of date palm trees" (*Exodus: Myth or History?*, p. 195).

Rohl has a problem, however, because his denial of the supernatural requires him to believe that the Israelites traversed the Yam-Supf (Red Sea or Reed Sea) by crossing shallow waters some 65 miles north of these locations, which are just east of the Gulf of Suez. They would need to do so in three days. Rohl basically concludes that the reference to three days is a late mistake and insertion.

But we who accept the reality of God's miraculous power have little problem with these locations being Marah and Elim. Some have pointed out that they are not three-days away from our Gulf of Suez crossing point, so not far enough away, but those who say that forget an important detail about the journeys of the Israelites. Everywhere they went in the wilderness, they were guided by the pillar of cloud and fire (Exod. 13:21-22; Num. 9:15-23). What is happening here is that the Lord is leading Israel in a somewhat circuitous route until they run out of water so that He can teach them the truth about their troubles.

Applications: So one important lesson we learn from God's dealings with His people in this passage is that things go wrong when God's people are doing what is right. They do so because the Lord has a special purpose for our times of

trouble. But the trouble with times of trouble is that our enemy also has a goal, and that purpose is being accomplished in the lives of God's people in this passage.

Even though they have been following the cloud all this time, the Israelites make Moses the scapegoat for their lack of success. How often do we think of our troubles in terms of what other people are doing rather than what the Lord is doing? That is the enemy's trick. In reality, the *against Moses* of verse 24 is against Yahweh. The same was true when Israel rejected Samuel in favor of a king.

What is the enemy's goal here? He wants to divide God's people in their time of trouble. The division of God's people in times of trouble is always the goal of the enemy of God's work. When he gets us complaining, he has aligned us with selfishness and division. Complaining is the opposite of thanksgiving, which is aligned with caring for others and unity. Complaining quenches the power of God's Spirit.

Certainly, the trouble caused churches like ours because of the pandemic fear has great potential to be used by the enemy to turn our thanksgiving into complaining, and our unity into division. Let's understand this truth about our troubles. Our enemy wants to use them to divide us. When you find yourself complaining against a fellow believer in times of trouble, wake up and hear the roar of Peter's lion:

"Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: whom resist steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world" (1 Pet. 5:8-9).

II. Our Lord wants to use our trouble to teach us (vv. 25-27).

Illustration: Our brother Sean can tell us a lot about different kinds of trees. A tree is truly an amazing work of our Creator's creation. In some ways, it seems to be the Lord's favorite plant.

It is interesting that the message of the Bible can be summed up as man's relationship to three trees. At the beginning, man dies with the sinful violation of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. At the end, man lives forever with the healing properties of the tree of life. And in the middle stands the cross of Jesus Christ, the tree of atonement and salvation that gets us from the tree of death at the beginning to the tree of life at the end.

C. H. McIntosh sees that central tree, the cross of Christ, illustrated by the tree of our passage: "Beauteous figure this of Him who was, in infinite grace, cast into the bitter waters of death, in order that those waters might yield naught but sweetness to us forever!" Each of us needs to understand the importance of these three trees to our lives. We begin as sinners, dead in our trespasses and sins; in the end, we need forgiveness and eternal life; Jesus died for our sins and rose again to save us by free grace. Have you repented of your sins and turned to the risen Lord Jesus to save you?

Application: When the Israelites complain against Moses, Moses *cries out* to the Lord (v. 25). That verb is the desperate cry of someone who is helpless. It is the opposite of what valiant men do (Isa. 33:7), but often the only option open to widows and orphans (Exod. 22:22-23).

It is when Moses cries out to the Lord that the Lord gives him the central statute and ordinance about our troubles. It is best summarized by the psalmist, "The righteous *cry* [same word], and the Lord heareth, and delivereth them out of all their troubles" (Ps. 34:17). That is the key truth

about our troubles – God hears our cry, and God delivers because He is our Healer. It is simply who He is and what He does (v. 26b). Notice with me three details about this promised deliverance in times of trouble:

1. The Lord delivers and heals us with supernatural omnipotence. The phrase *The Lord showed him a tree* seems to describe some form of nonverbal communication. Perhaps a theophany points to a tree, or a tree simply illuminated like a Christmas tree. A million-plus people have no water. The water they finally found is bitter. They are complaining against Moses. What can be done? For the Lord it is very simple – He points to a tree and the problem is solved. I am struck by how easy it is for God to do His mighty works.

Here again we can see a similarity to the cross of Calvary. Sin brings spiritual drought. Souls thirst unquenched. What is to be done? Again, it is very simple – the Lord points to the tree. Come to the cross, all who are weary and heavy laden. Throw the cross into the pool of your troubles.

2. The Lord teaches us to cry for deliverance in our Marahs, not our Elims (v. 25 – the *there* referring to Marah is emphatic, and it contrasts the *there* of v. 27). It was in Marah that Moses learned to cry out, not in Elim.

C. H. McIntosh comments on our need for the trouble of Marah from time to time: “Man is a religious being, and peculiarly susceptible of the influences which arise from music, sculpture, painting, and pompous rites and ceremonies. When these things stand connected with the full supply of all his natural wants—yea, with all the ease and luxury of life, nothing but the mighty power of God’s Word and Spirit can keep one true to Christ” (2.201, fn.). How much more do we need the lessons of Marah in our day of abundance?

3. The Lord teaches us to cry for deliverance one believer at a time. The pronouns and verbal forms of verses 25-26 are all singular. I believe the Lord is directing this statute and ordinance about the need to cry out in times of trouble especially to Moses. This truth is very personal: "I will hear your cry. I will deliver you. I am your healer, Moses."

The end of verse 25 tells us that God desired to *prove* or *train* Moses through this time of trouble. The word is used in Exod. 20:20, where it includes imparting the ability to avoid sin in the future: "And Moses said unto the people, Fear not: for God is come to *prove* you, and that his fear may be before your faces, that ye sin not." That is the point of verse 26 - that the fulness of the Lord's blessing is available to us if we trust Him and obey Him, if we sin not.

On one occasion, Moses would forget that God hears his cry, would instead lash-out in frustration at the complaining people, and then strike a rock in anger, which the Lord had told him to speak to (Numbers 20). That was a day of lost blessing for Moses. When we learn that God hears our cry, it keeps us from the sin of frustration and complaining in our troubles, and puts us in the middle of the blessed assurance of verse 26. What blessings are we forfeiting because we would rather complain in times of trouble?

Conclusion: The Lord is our healer. He cares for His people in a way that is different than His treatment of the Egyptians, who chose to harden their hearts and endure his judgment rather than cling to the blood of the Passover Lamb for redemption. Trouble still comes to the redeemed, but we have a statute and an ordinance when it does - very simply: "The righteous cry, and the Lord heareth, and delivereth them out of all their troubles" (Ps. 34:17). We need not complain. We must trust and obey.

That same Psalm prophesies of the troubles the Savior would endure for our sins in verse 20, “He keepeth all his bones; not one of them is broken.” Jesus uttered the cry of the righteous on the cross of Calvary for our sins – “My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken Me?” Unlike us, God forsook Jesus on that tree, refusing to deliver His own Son from the trouble we deserved. We deserved it, but He endured it for us.

And now, when we find ourselves in the bitter waters of our troubles, the Lord still points to that tree, the cross of Calvary with our suffering Savior there, and He says, “Cast that into your bitter waters, and I will make them sweet.” Have we been too long in the shade of the date-palms to care about that tree? Are we so impervious to the roar of the lion that we remain content to complain, divide, and selfishly blame other people? Or are we the righteous who cry out to the Lord in the days of our Marah, whom He hears, and whom He delivers with supernatural omnipotence, one at a time? The choice is ours this morning.

“A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction—the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*