

2026 Lenten Devotional

Ex 15:22-26

So Moses brought Israel from the Red sea, and they went out into the wilderness of Shur; and they went three days in the wilderness, and found no water. And when they came to Marah, they could not drink of the waters of Marah, for they were bitter: therefore the name of it was called Marah. And the people murmured against Moses, saying, What shall we drink?

Moses had just led us through the Red Sea and Miriam had sung a victory song over our oppressors. We were pumped. But then he took us into the wilderness for three days without water! Our canteens were dry. We were thirsty, and the spring he found was a soda spring. Bitter. I didn't believe that guy in front when he said he couldn't drink it, I filled my canteens anyway and tried it for myself. Oh, that first sip was bad, but the second was worse! What was Moses thinking, for we will as surely die of thirst out here as if the Egyptians had slain us, and then what will they say about us?

Then when we had all tried it and morale was at the absolute worst, God tells Moses to cut a tree and throw it in the spring, which made the water sweet. I dumped the nasty stuff out of my canteen and refilled it. Ahh, I drank, and drank, and drank. Finally Moses speaks:

26 And said, If thou wilt diligently hearken to the voice of the LORD thy God, and wilt do that which is right in his sight, and wilt give ear to his commandments, and keep all his statutes, I will put none of these diseases upon thee, which I have brought upon the Egyptians: for I am the LORD that healeth thee.

Disease. We in the new world do not fear it as much as cancer. For it is a curse of the third world. And Israel labored in an Egyptian ghetto with third world diseases, many of them water-borne—dysentery, salmonella, shigella. But what has that got to do with Marah?

Where did they fill their canteens when they left that Passover night 5 days earlier? In Egypt. And their canteens? The same ones that they carried to work in the brick factory every day—water skins, clay bottles—full of grime and sediment. Like the plaque on unbrushed teeth, bacteria make a biofilm glue that keeps them from easily being rinsed away. But lye or soda water is basic with high pH, and can dissolve biofilms. That is, if the canteens are empty before they are washed with lye. An activity which took a while, because every desperate thirsty Israelite had to try the water, only to find it undrinkable. Finally, after much grumbling, He commanded Moses to throw in a tree, undoubtedly acidic with a low pH, which neutralized the high pH of the water.

Because God had a plan all along to purify their water supply and heal their diseases. When He solemnly told them, “if you keep my statutes, you won't get sick again”, the wilderness journey, the dry canteen, the bitter water, the long wait, were all part of His plan. A plan that would succeed despite the stubbornness of the newly freed Israelites. He has a healthy plan for us too, even through a lengthy Lenten sojourn in a parched wilderness, if we obey His rules. And don't grumble too much.