

MARA, OR THE BITTER WATERS SWEETENED

NO. 987

A SERMON
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AT THE METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE, NEWINGTON

*“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?
And he cried unto the LORD;
and the LORD showed him a tree, which when he had cast into the waters, the waters were made sweet.”
Exodus 15:23-25*

WHAT a sudden change from the sound of the timbrel to the voice of murmuring! You saw the maidens dancing three days ago and you little dreamed that they would make part of yonder clamorous throng who surround the servant of God, and cry, “What shall we drink?” Such are the changes of our outward conditions and of our inward feelings, so fickle and so mutable is man.

What is there that can be rested upon in this mortal life? We say today, “My mountain standeth firm, I shall never be moved.” Tomorrow, *terra firma* there is none and we are tossed upon a stormy sea. Our life is like an April day, the sunshine alternates with the shower.

Or like each day of all the year, the morning and the evening are needful to complete it. Quick on the heels of light treads the darkness, followed with equal haste by light again. The sun's rule, at this golden hour, is but temporary. He must abdicate in favor of the usurping stars, but they in their turn, must give way before his lordly presence yet again.

This world, which is our inn, owns to the sign of the “Checkers”—the blacks and whites are everywhere. We can be sure of nothing between here and heaven of the things which are seen. But of this we may be certain, that underneath all the outward change there is the immutable love of God towards His people, and that, after all, the change lies only in the seeming things, not in the things which truly are.

For the things which are not seen are eternal and changes come not there. It is but in the things which are seen that the change occurs. Let us set the less store by earth, because its fashion abides not. Let us prize heaven more, because it cannot fade.

I. The text directs your attention, first of all, to THE EVILS OF THE WILDERNESS.

We need not spend much time in thinking of these evils, because they throw themselves in our way often enough and the tendency of our mind is unduly to exaggerate them. Notice that the perils and trials of the wilderness occur *very early in the pilgrim life*.

It is a notion, I have no doubt, of very young Christians who still have the shell upon their heads and are scarce hatched, that their trials are over now that they have become winged with faith. They had far better have reckoned that their trials have begun with tenfold force, now that they are numbered with the servants of the Most High.

Whatever else comes not to you, O servant of God, this will surely be fulfilled, “In the world ye shall have tribulation.” “What son is he whom the Father chasteneth not?” Some privileges are not common to all the adopted, but the privilege of chastisement is universal to all true sons. It is the token of bastardy if the rod be escaped, but scourging is the sure pledge of paternal love.

I say, however, that these trials come very soon. Israel was no sooner across the Red Sea than they went three days into the wilderness of Shur, but found no water. And on the third day, when they did

arrive at a fountain, they found worse than no water—for it was so brackish, so altogether unfit for drinking, that though they thought they would have drunk anything, they could not possibly drink this.

What, in three days must they who sang unto the Lord, because He triumphed gloriously, nauseate the water for which their thirst makes them pant? In three days shall they be reduced to such straits that they must drink or die, and yet feel that they should die if they were to drink of such nauseous streams?

Ah yes, with some of us our delight at Conversion was very great, our exhilaration at finding the Savior was something never to be forgotten, and yet only a day or so after we were stumbled with great temptation, amazed at the discovery of the evil of our hearts, or tried by the coldness of our fellow Christians, or the cruelty of the outside world, so that we found we had come to Marah.

And this was all the severer trial, because some of us had found a degree of pleasure in the ways of sin, and now it stumbled us to find sorrow in the ways of God. When Israel was in Egypt, they drank of the river Nile. No ordinary water that. To this day the dwellers on the banks of the Nile assert that the water has a peculiar taste not to be discovered in any other stream, and they prefer the waters of the Nile to all the waters in the world besides.

What a change from the sweetness of the Nile to the bitterness of Marah! Did not the suggestion rise in their hearts, “It was better with us in the bondage of Egypt, with water in abundance, than it is now in the liberty of the wilderness with the bitterness of Marah?” The devil tempted some of us at the very first by saying, “See what you have got by being a Christian? While you were as others are, your mind had mirth. Now that you have come out and followed the Crucified, you have lost the liveliness of your spirits, the brightness of your wit—that which made life worth having is taken away from you.”

Young Christian, is that your case today? Be not stumbled, neither believe the enemy. Man, it were better to die at Marah free, than live a slave by the sweet Nile. Even men who know not the Spirit of God have felt it were better to die free than live as slaves, and truly to be a slave to Satan is so degrading a thing, that if this mouth were forever filled with Marah’s bitterness, yet were it better to be so than to be enchanted with the pleasures of sin. Yet these early trials are very severe and need much grace lest they cause us great mischief.

Secondly, these evils *assume varied shapes*. You noticed that for the first three days in the wilderness they found no water—that is one trial. But the next day, or at the end of the third day, they found water. Now they thought their trial was over. Alas! it had only changed its shape. They found water, but it was too bitter to drink.

Do not be in a hurry to change your trials, dear friends. We have heard of some who have repined that they had no children, and like Rachel, their cry was, “Give me children, or else I die.” Ere long they have had children who proved to be far worse than none. Better no son than an Absalom.

We have known those who were in good health, but discontented because they had no wealth. They have gained wealth at last, but with an injured constitution, they have had no power to enjoy it. If we could choose our trials, we might well remember the wisdom of the old philosopher who told the people oppressed by a tyrant to be content with his tyranny, “For,” said he, “it is with oppressors as with mosquitoes, let those suck which are now upon you, for if you drive those off, the fresh ones which will succeed them will be hungrier than those that are there now. Better be content with the tyranny you have, than seek a new one.”

It is much the same with the trials we now feel. You will get used to them by degrees. They will spend their force. Desire for a change of trials may only be a wish for a worse affliction, for whether was the worse—to have no water, or to have the water and to find it so bitter that you could not drink it?

Yet when God changes the trial, be well-satisfied that it should be changed. You may anticipate, Christian, that you will have your trial changed, indeed, you must reckon that it is so. I mean that if today it is smooth sailing with you, though yesterday waves rolled mountains high, it is only a change of trial.

You are now tried by prosperity, which may prove to be a more severe test for you than adversity. Is the wind balmy, blows it from the south? It is but another trial for you, be sure of that, for they who have

withstood the northern blast, and grown the ruddier and stronger for its influence, have often grown faint and weary under softer airs. Watch you in all things, your trials are with you constantly. The crucible is changed, the fire still burns.

Note again, that as the trials of the wilderness came soon and assumed various shapes, so often do the trials of the Christian *touch very vital matters*. They found no water, or finding it, it was bitter. It is not said they found no wine—a small trial indeed. It is not said they found no milk, yet might the infant children have been sorely troubled by such a want.

But they found no drinkable water. Here was a denial of an essential of life. They must have water, it was no luxury, it was a necessity. With the hot burning sand beneath them reflecting the fierce heat of a cruel sun, not to have water in the wilderness is to feel an urgent necessity producing a terrible pain. God may touch us, and probably has done so or will, in points most vital. To be tried in the loss of some of your superfluities, my brethren, is but little. But to lose even the little that you had to live upon, to be brought to straitness of bread—this is real tribulation.

To have the hand put forth to touch your bone and your flesh—this is affliction. Believe me, our virtues and graces look very fine, and we think much of them until they undergo that ordeal, and that test often takes from them their gloss and beauty. We find how great our weakness is when the very marrow of our bones seems to be a den in which pains, like robbers, hide themselves.

God may touch you in the most beloved object of your heart. It is not one child that is taken out of many, but the only one. It is not a friend or distant relative, but the partner of your bosom is laid low. Do not wonder if the trial affects you greatly, and comes home to your soul and heart. It is one of God's determinations that trials shall not be mock trials with His servants, and the grace given shall not be imaginary, but true.

God never plays at chastening His children. No trial for the present seems to be joyous, but grievous. By the blueness of the wound the heart is made better, if it do not bruise, it does not benefit. Very much in proportion to the bitterness felt will be the benefit that will come of it.

They found no water. O my God, to what straits do you reduce Your own people. Your own people who carry with them the title-deeds of a land that flows with milk and honey! Jordan and Kishon are theirs, and yet they find only Marah to drink while they are here. Your own people for whom You have appointed that they shall dwell in a land of brooks and rivers of water, where they shall sit every man under his vine and fig tree. These, Your darlings, whom You have brought out with a high hand and an outstretched arm, are brought to the extreme of poverty and the little that they have has often a bitter taste infused into it.

Notice, once again, there is *a reason why the earthly mercies which supply our necessities must be more or less bitter*. When Israel received water out of the rock it was not bitter, but this water came out of the sand. To this day in the desert water is found in different places, but where it oozes up from a sandy bed it is almost, without exception, so brackish and bitter, by reason of the sand, that it is not fit for human drinking. And even the camels, unless they are sorely pressed, turn away from it with great aversion.

The sand has tainted it, the flavor of earth has got into the blessing. So it is with most of our blessings—by reason of our sin and infirmity, too much of the flavor of earth enters into the gifts of heaven. Our common mercies, when we receive them directly from heaven as God gives them, are mercies, indeed—cool, flowing streams that gush from the rock of His favor.

But we are apt to trace them to the creature, so ready to look upon them as derived from earth instead of coming from heaven. And just in that proportion may we expect to find bitterness in them. What can you hope for in a wilderness, but productions congruous to it? Canaan! who looks for bitterness there? Is it not the land that flows with milk and honey? Sweet land, when shall we reach you?

Your sweetness is but congruous to yourself. But here, in this wilderness, where we have no continuing city, who looks for the streams of Lebanon? who hopes to find Canaan's fruits in the wilderness of Sin? As well seek to gather from the briny sea the sweet fruits of the palm or the luscious

clusters of the vine, as hope to find, amidst these changing scenes, comforts that shall be all comfortable and joys that shall be all joyous. No, they will be comforts, but they will be often embittered. They will be joyous somewhat, but the earthy flavor in them will make us remember that this is not our rest.

I know not that I ought to detain you longer with these evils of the wilderness. I do not feel it is wrong to speak of them, for we do not mention them with any view of discouraging those who have set out on pilgrimage. We are not like those who hold up their hands and say, “The lions, the giants, the dragons. Young pilgrim, you will never reach the land of promise.”

But yet we would imitate the Savior, who said to the follower who thought he could follow Him whithersoever He might go, “Sit down and count the cost.” There are trials for you, you followers of Christ, if there are none for others—peculiar trials for you, peculiar joys ten thousand times outweighing them, but yet peculiar griefs, new griefs of a new life of which it will be a blessed thing to have been a participant.

But there they are and we will not deceive you. For you there will be Marahs that others may not know and for you there will be long thirsts where others drink to the full. Nevertheless, we will take Christ and His reproach. Christ and His Marah, rather than the world with its sweetness—for with every drawback that is supposable to Christ Jesus, He is better than the world with all the additions that can be invented by the sons of mirth.

II. Thus much on the first point, the evils of the wilderness. Now secondly, THE TENDENCY OF HUMAN NATURE.

The people murmured against Moses, saying, “What shall we drink?” Do not say “Human nature,” says one—say, “The tendency of Jewish nature.” Ah, but if anything, I would prefer the people in the wilderness to any other—rest assured that they were no worse than we are. They are an example to us of what our heart is, and whatever we see in them we have but to watch a little and we shall see it all in ourselves.

It was not Jewish nature that God proved in the wilderness so much as human nature at its very best estate. Assuredly, the tendency of human nature is to murmur. They murmured, complained, found fault. A very easy thing, for the very word “murmur,” how simple it is, made up of two infantile sounds—*mur mur*. No sense in it, no wit in it, no thought in it. It is the cry rather of a brute than of a man—*murmur*—just a double groan.

Easy is it for us to kick against the dispensations of God, to give utterance to our griefs, and what is worse—to the inference we drew from them that God has forgotten to be gracious. To murmur is our tendency, but, my dear brethren and sisters in Christ, do we mean to let the tendencies of the old nature rule us? Will we murmur? O that we might have grace rather to say with Job, “Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him!”

Shall a living man complain? Have we not received so much good from the hands of the Lord that we may well receive evil without rebellion? Will we not disappoint Satan, and overrule the tendency of the flesh, by saying in the might of God’s Spirit, “The LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.”

I know we are apt to say, “Well, that is human nature,” and when we have said it is human nature, we suppose we have given a very excellent excuse for doing it. But is human nature to rule the divine nature? You, believer, profess to be a partaker of the divine nature. Let the superior force govern, let that which comes from above be uppermost and put the lower nature down. Let us eschew murmurings and complainings, and magnify and adore the God who lays our comforts low.

Observe—and this is worthy of note—that the murmuring was not ostensibly against God. They murmured against Moses. And have you ever noticed how the most of us, when we are in a murmuring vein, are not honest enough to murmur distinctly against God. No, the child is dead, and we form a conjecture that there was some wrong treatment on the part of a nurse, or the surgeon, or ourselves.

We lay our hold on that for which there may not be a shadow of proof and the murmuring is upon that point. Or we have lost money and have been brought down from opulence to almost poverty. Then

some one person was dishonest, a certain party betrayed us in a transaction by failing to fulfill his part, and so all the murmuring is heaped on that person. We deny, perhaps indignantly, that we murmur against God—and to prove it we double the zeal with which we murmur against Moses.

To complain of the second cause is about as sensible as the conduct of the dog, which bites the stick with which it is beaten. It owes no anger to the stick, but to the person who uses it. Is there evil in the city and the Lord has not done it? Whoever is the instrument, the Lord overrules.

In our heart of hearts our rebellion is against the Lord Himself. We have not quite honesty enough to rail against God openly and avowedly, and so we hypocritically cover up our repining against Him by murmuring against some person, occasion, or event. “If I had not happened to go out on such an occasion, I might not have had that cold and been laid aside.” Thus we blame an accidental circumstance, as if it were not part of the divine arrangement.

Is this complaining of the second cause better than railing against God? I think not, for, in very deed, it is railing against God, and it is, in addition, an injustice to the second cause, so made a butt of. When Pharaoh bade the Israelites make bricks and gave them no straw, there was injustice. But when the Israelites gathered around Moses, and virtually told him that he ought to supply them with water, it was much the same thing.

Whence should this man have water to give them to drink? How could he sweeten Marah? They knew right well that it was not possible for him to open a well for them in the wilderness. They complained, I say, in their hearts, really against God, but they added to this the hypocrisy and the injustice of veiling their murmuring against the Most High by an unjust and clamorous complaint against His servant Moses. Stop your tongue, my brother. Cease the caviling against this and that, against him or her, for be sure that you are doing injustice to your fellow man as well as a wrong to your God.

Once more, while we speak of this tendency in human nature, I want you to observe how they betrayed an utter unbelief of God. They said to Moses, “What shall we drink?” They meant by it, “By what means can God supply our want of water?” What a question! They were at the Red Sea, and God cleft the intervening gulf in twain, through the depths thereof they marched dry shod. There is Marah’s water—shall it be more difficult for God to purify than to divide? To sweeten a fountain—is that more difficult than to cleanse a sea? Is anything too hard for the Lord?

A great miracle had been wrought, had they but considered it and exercised even the lowest degree of faith, they must have seen that He who could work such a miracle as they had seen could work yet another. And they might joyously have stood at Marah’s brink and have sung, “He who cast Pharaoh and his chosen captains into the Red Sea, and delivered His people, can give His chosen drink. Therefore we sing, Spring up, O well, and let your waters be sweet and clean.”

O that they had faith in God but as a grain of mustard seed, and they would have seen great things and glorified His name. Do you blame them? Do so—blame them much, but include yourselves in the censure. How often has it been so with us? We have said, “I will never distrust my God after this memorable deliverance, this singular display of His power has slain my unbelief.”

Yet a new trial has occurred, and our faith—where is it? Had the Son of Man Himself been on the earth with those quick eyes to discern the faith which He Himself creates, could He find faith in us in the hour of tribulation? Be humbled as you see yourselves in this mirror. Behold your instability, which is as water.

How like to reeds shaken with the wind are we. Or like meteors, which flash across the brow of night to leave the darkness denser than before. How soon is the glory of our confidence spent and the excellence of our faith withered. Hold Thou our feet in life, great God, or we shall soon be silent in darkness.

III. Now, thirdly—and may divine help, the help of the Holy Ghost be given me—I will speak upon THE REMEDY OF GRACE.

I have shown you the evils of the wilderness and the tendency of nature. It is delightful to behold the remedy of grace. First, if you would have Marah's bitterness healed, *take the case in prayer to God*. God begins by making us begin. The people complained to Moses. Moses took the complaint to his Master. In all trials, the surest way to a remedy is prayer.

In heavenly pharmacy, prayer is a *catholicon*. It heals all things. Prayer, which overcomes heaven, will certainly never be overmatched on earth. Neither men nor devils can stand against prayer—it smites them hip and thigh like another Samson. The bow of prayer returns not empty. It is swifter than an eagle, it is stronger than a lion. Take your case to God, O heir of trouble—unroll Rabshakeh's letter before the Host High and the Lord will silence his revilings. Half the work is done when it is brought before God in supplication.

Note, next, that *as soon as we have a prayer God has a remedy*. The remedy is near at hand, but we do not perceive it till it is shown to us. "The Lord showed him a tree." The tree had been growing for years on purpose to be used. God has a remedy for all our troubles before they happen to us.

A delightful employment it is to notice how God forestalls Himself—how long before we reach the encampment, if there be the bitter well, there is also the healing tree. All is ready between here and heaven. He that has gone to prepare a place for us by His presence, has prepared the way to that place for us by His providence.

But brethren, though for every trouble in this mortal life there is a remedy, you and I do not always discern it. "The Lord showed him a tree." I am persuaded that for every lock in Doubting Castle there is a key, but the promises are often in great confusion to our minds, so that we are perplexed. If a blacksmith should bring you his great bundle of picklocks, you would have to turn them over, and over, and over—and try half of them, perhaps two-thirds, before you would find the right one—ay, and perhaps the right one would be left to the last.

It is always a blessing to remember that for every affliction there is a promise in the Word of God—a promise which meets the case and was made on purpose for it. But you may not be always able to find it—no, you may go fumbling over the Scriptures long before you get the true Word. But when the Lord shows it to you, when it comes with His power to the soul, when the heart can grasp it, and cry, "Ay, that is the Word, my Master. Indeed, and of a truth that is the precious truth which can sweeten my sad discomforts," oh, what a bliss it is! All glory be unto the Holy Ghost, who to this day is ready to show unto His praying servants the sweetening tree when they come to the bitter streams.

Now that remedy for the healing of Marah's water was *a very strange one*. Why should a tree sweeten the waters? I do not suppose there was any natural efficacy in the tree, although that would not be altogether impossible, since there are trees, so travelers tell us, which have been used in the sweetening of waters.

There is in South Africa a certain river which water cannot be drunk until branches of a certain tree are placed in it, and then the bitterness which is in the stream is deposited at the bottom and the water becomes drinkable. The thing is not unnatural nor altogether necessarily supernatural, though I think in this case it was supernatural, for there are no trees found now in the wilderness of Shur that would have the effect of sweetening brackish waters.

This was no doubt a miraculous incident and it was also meant to teach us something. The fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil was eaten by our first parents and embittered all. There is a tree of life, the leaves of which are for the healing of the nations. Blessed is he that eats of this tree of life. It shall take away from him the bitterness which the first forbidden fruit brought into the world.

A tree is a living thing—may we not learn that there are living principles in true religion which will sweeten our adversities? Mere doctrines may not, but living principles will. These cast into our troubles will assuage our grief.

Best of all, may not this tree cut down be an emblem of the Savior? A glorious tree indeed was He, with spreading branches and top reaching to heaven—but He must suffer the axe for our sakes. And now, today, contemplating His atoning sacrifice and by faith resting in Him, the troubles of life and the

troubles of death are sweetened by His dear cross, which, though it is a bitter tree in itself, is the antidote for all the bitterness that comes upon us here and hereafter.

That remedy was most effective. When they cut down the tree and put it into the water, it turned the water sweet—they could drink of it. And let me assure you, that in the case of our trouble, the cross is a most effective sweetener. Shall I put the tree into the water for a minute and then ask you to drink?

Have you been suffering pain or any other form of tribulation? I will let the cross asoak in it for a minute and your first reflection will be—“In all this that I am called to suffer, there is not even a single particle of punishment for my sin. God has punished Christ, consequently He cannot punish me. To punish two for one offense would be unjust, therefore there is nothing penal in all that I am suffering.”

I do not know of any reflection more consoling than this, that my sorrow is not laid on me by a Judge, nor inflicted on me as the result of divine anger. There is not a drop of wrath in a riverful of a believer’s grief. Does not that take the bitterness out of affliction and make it sweet?

And then the reflection goes further. Since Christ has died for me, I am God’s dear child, and now if I suffer, all my suffering comes from my Father’s hand—nay, more—from my Father’s heart. He loves me, and therefore makes me suffer, not because He does not love, but because He does love does He thus afflict me. In every stripe I see another token of paternal love. This it is to sweeten Marah’s waters indeed.

Then will come the next reflection—that a Father’s love is joined with infinite wisdom, and that, therefore, every ingredient in the bitter cup is measured out drop by drop, and grain by grain, and there is not one pang too many ever suffered by an heir of heaven. The cross is not only weighed to the pound but to the ounce—ay, to the lowest conceivable grain. You shall not have one half a drop of grief more than is absolutely necessary for your good and God’s glory. And does not this also sweeten the cross, that it is laid on us by infinite wisdom and by a Father’s hand?

Ravishing, indeed, is the reflection in the midst of all our grief and suffering that Jesus Christ suffers with us. In all your affliction, O member of the body, the Head is still a sharer. Deep are the sympathies of the Redeemer—acute, certain, quick, infallible. He never forgets His saints.

All the while the Lord lays His chastening hand upon His servants they may be cheered by this reflection—that in this He is making them conformable unto Christ. What should they know of Gethsemane if they had no sweat of pain? What should they know of the passion if they never had to cry, “I thirst,” or “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”

They were poor scholars in the school of Christ’s sufferings if they endured no sufferings themselves. And it is a blessed thing, a sweet thing to drink of His cup, and to be baptized with His baptism.

Moreover, when the child of God is in his right state, it is always enough for him that his condition is the result of his Father’s will. Is it God’s will? Is it Christ’s will? Then it is my will. How could I dare to wish anything to be otherwise than divine love appoints?

I do not know but what it will become sometimes to the Christian a subject of joy that Marah is bitter. For suppose Marah had been sweet, then, Moses had not prayed to God, and then the tree had not been cut down, and they had never known the power of God to sweeten bitter waters.

It must be an awful thing to live an unafflicted life on earth. You say it must be a very delightful thing. I have no doubt it may be from some aspects, but a person who has had no sickness, how can he have a sympathetic heart? What service can he render in cheering the people of God? If you never had any trials, I should suppose, unless something very extraordinary happened, that you would become harsh and untender. I am afraid some would grow brutal, coarse, hard of heart.

Who wishes, where others have to suffer, to claim immunity from a blessing which brings rich consolations with it and works eternal benefits? Beloved, this is ever one thing that sweetens Marah—that it afterwards brings forth the comfortable fruits of righteousness. Our trials are not sent to us alone and by themselves. There is a *quantum suff.* of grace sent with them, by which they are made available as means to sanctify us, and make us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light.

I will not keep you much longer upon this point, but I must notice that while I have shown you that the remedy is very efficacious, it is something more than efficacious—it is *transcendent*. The water was bitter, but it became absolutely sweet. The same water that was bitter became sweet, and the grace of God, by leading us into contemplations that spring out of the cross of Christ, can make our trials themselves to become pleasant to us.

It is a triumph of grace in the heart when we not only acquiesce in trouble, but even rejoice in it. “We glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience.” It is a grand thing when we can truly say that as to the rod of the covenant we would not escape it if we might. It becomes in the judgment of wisdom so good a thing to be tried, that though we would not seek it, yet we accept it with something more than readiness, and the bitter thing becomes sweet to us.

Let me say, and have done with this part of the subject, that the remedy which is suggested to us by a spiritualizing of the text is efficacious for all trials and will be found especially so for the bitter waters of death at the last. With all that can be said about death, it is not a pleasant subject for contemplation—and needs to be viewed in connection with covenant consolations.

Certain brethren buoy themselves up with the hope of escaping death by the second advent. I am not certain that they are wiser than David who did not hope to omit the valley of the shadow of death, but trusted that he should fear no evil therein, because the rod and staff would be his stay. The death of Christ robs death of its terrors. The prospect of the resurrection and the certainty of immortality make us say, “Surely the bitterness of death is past!”

Be it remembered that if the cross avails to sweeten all the bitterness of our mortal life, and even the last bitterness of death, it is assuredly available this morning to sweeten the bitterness of our present sorrow. Did you drink any quassia-cup this morning before you came here? Do you feel desponding at this moment, my brother, my sister?

Go to your Savior at once. View Him suffering on your behalf, behold the completion of your reconciliation to God, mark the security of your soul through the finished work of your glorious Surety. Take down your harps from the willows, put away your ashes—ask the Lord to anoint you with the oil of joy instead of mourning, and even at the waters of Marah lift up your song again and let the timbrel still be heard.

“Sing unto the LORD, for He hath triumphed gloriously—Marah’s bitterness has He turned to sweetness. He has cut down the mighty tree which He gave for us, and which yielded itself to the axe for us, and into the bitter stream the tree is cast, and now henceforth, O Marah, you are sweet indeed.”

Did you come here this morning as Naomi when she returned to her city and said, “Call me not Naomi, call me Mara: for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me.” Ah, when she dandled on her knee, and held in her fond bosom the child of Ruth and Boaz, the joy of her old age, she was glad to think the neighbors had not changed her name, and she was willing enough to be called Naomi still.

Call not yourself Marah, but remember the new name which the Lord has named upon you. The bitter pool itself, call it not Marah. Be not so ready to affix names of sad memorials, your griefs are apt enough to gall your memory—do not aid them to sting you. Call the well by another name. Forget Marah, and remember JEHOVAH Rophi, the Lord that heals both you and the waters. Record the mercy rather than the sorrow, and give thanks unto the Most High.

Now, in closing, somebody will say, “This is a very curious missionary sermon.” Yes, but you see I did not appoint the missionary sermon for today—my brethren did that, and certainly I did not arrange my own sickness, so as to make it fall on this day.

How can I dance to the sound of the timbrel when I am feeble and sad? If I had the choosing of my own state of health and mind, I would have the choosing of my own texts, and make them always suitable to the occasions as they arise. But I am obliged to preach what I can preach, and as I know pretty well the flavor of Marah, and a little about the sweetness which the healing tree can give it, I can only tell you what I know by experience.

But it *is* a good missionary sermon for all that. Let me show you how. Here is A SUGGESTION OF COMPASSION.

Brethren, all the world over, the heathen have trials, bitterness, woes. I said that Christians have peculiar woes, but the dark places of the earth have direr sorrows. Some nations are devastated with war. Others are tormented with diabolical customs and rites—their actions even towards themselves through their superstition are brutal.

I may well liken the world that lies in darkness to a thirsty caravan gathered around Marah's well where the water is too bitter to drink. Oh, the woes, the woes of mankind! High are the Andes, lofty the Himalayas, but the woes of the sons of Adam are higher, huger still. The Ganges and the Indus, and other mighty streams pour their floods into the ocean, but what mighty deep could contain the torrents of human grief? A very deluge is the sorrow as well as the sin of man.

And my brethren, the heathen know nothing of the healing tree, the tree cut down of old, which still has power to sweeten mortal misery. You know it, you have your trials, and you surmount them by the appeals you make to your Lord, and by the power of His consolations. But alas! these sons of darkness have your same griefs, and more, but they have not your Comforter.

For them the deluge, but not the ark. For them the tempest, but not the refuge. And you are so sure that you have that which would cheer them—no doubt passes across your mind as to the Gospel. These are wavering times in which some professors, and even some teachers, almost believe that the Gospel is but one theory of many, and will have to stand its test, and in all probability will fail as many human systems of thought have done.

You think not so. You believe that God's Gospel is a verity, a revelation of JEHOVAH. Heaven and earth may pass away, but not His Word, His Christ, His decree, His covenant. You know that you have a tree that can heal the bitter fountains. No doubt comes across your mind as to that—what then?

By common humanity, much more by the tender movements of the grace of God upon your souls, I conjure you present this remedy to those who need it and who need it so much. Will anything suffice as a substitute for it? Is there anywhere on earth another healing tree beside that which fell beneath the axe at Calvary?

Are there other leaves for the healing of the nations? On the seven-hilled city of Rome, grows there a tree that can heal man's diseases? No. It is a deadly upas. Cut it down and burn the very roots thereof. Among the fancies of idolatry are there any inventions of man that can cool his fevered brow and sooth his griefs?

Does Mohammedanism offer hopes for eternity that can light up the grave to an awakened sinner? Are there thoughts of bliss in idolatry calculated to cheer the sepulchre? All religions answer, "Comforts are not in us." It is only at the cross, it is only by Jesus crucified that the world can be healed.

Hitherto little has been accomplished compared with our desires, and in contrast to our ambitions, next to nothing. But faith, darting beyond the things that are seen, flying into the presence-chamber of God, can behold Him writing with the eternal pen, "All flesh shall see the salvation of God." And she is sure that the tree will sweeten the waters yet.

Come, brethren, let your faith prove itself by your works. Help today—today, by your gifts. Help tomorrow—tomorrow, by your prayers. Help some of you, by consecrating yourselves to mission labor.

There is a prayer I mean to continue to offer until it is answered—that God would pour out on this church a missionary spirit. I want to see our young men devoting themselves to the work—some that will not be afraid to venture and preach Jesus Christ in the regions beyond.

I have not much faith in missionary societies. It gets less, I must protest, each year. Yet we must never put aside one instrumentality until we have a better one ready. If the Lord would send the living fire through the churches of England, if He would send from on high a divine impulse, we should see starting up here and there men who would say—"Here are we, send us." The Spirit of God will say, "Separate me Paul and Barnabas for the work," and when this is done, I look to see far happier days.

We have sweetened the waters a little—no more the suttee burns. The African is free. The slave ship crosses no more the deep. In some regions, exterminating wars have ceased. The white dove of peace flies where the raven of war was seen. Glory be to God. A few leaves cast into the waters have done this.

Let us bear a whole Christ and a whole Gospel amongst the nations and lay the tree in this Marah, until at last the whole world shall drink of the sweet waters of divine love and God shall be all in all.

God bless you, beloved, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

PORTION OF SCRIPTURE READ BEFORE SERMON—EXODUS 15

Taken from The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit C. H. Spurgeon Collection. Only necessary changes have been made, such as correcting spelling errors, some punctuation usage, capitalization of deity pronouns, and minimal updating of a few archaic words. The content is unabridged. Additional Bible-based resources are available at www.spurgeongems.org.