

Exodus|Liberation and the Mission of God

Bitterness and the Trial

Exodus 15.22-16.5; 17.1-7

11.1.15

Then Moses led 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. When they came to Marah, they could not drink the waters of Marah, for they were bitter; therefore it was named Marah. So the people grumbled at Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?" Then he cried out to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a tree; and he threw it into the waters, and the waters became sweet. There He made for them a statute and regulation, and there He tested them. And He said, "If you will give earnest heed to the voice of the LORD your God, and do what is right in His sight, and give ear to His commandments, and keep all His statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you which I have put on the Egyptians; for I, the LORD, am your healer." Then they came to Elim where there were twelve springs of water and seventy date palms, and they camped there beside the waters. Then they set out from Elim, and all the congregation of the sons of Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after their departure from the land of Egypt. The whole congregation of the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The sons of Israel said to them, "Would that we had died by the LORD'S hand in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat, when we ate bread to the full; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." Then the LORD said to Moses, "Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day, that I may test them, whether or not they will walk in My instruction. "On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather daily."

Then all the congregation of the sons of Israel journeyed by stages from the wilderness of Sin, according to the command of the LORD, and camped at Rephidim, and there was no water for the people to drink. Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water that we may drink." And Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?" But the people thirsted there for water; and they grumbled against Moses and said, "Why, now, have you brought us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" So Moses cried out to the LORD, saying, "What shall I do to this people? A little more and they will stone me." Then the LORD said to Moses, "Pass before the people and take with you some of the elders of Israel; and take in your hand your staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. "Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb; and you shall strike the rock, and water will come out of it, that the people may drink." And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel. He named the place Massah and Meribah because of the quarrel of the sons of Israel, and because they tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us, or not?"

We've been looking at the Book of Exodus on Sunday mornings and thus far, the Israelites enslaved in Egypt and only remotely remembering that God has made promises to them. He is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and He intends to rescue them and to SHOW HIMSELF to them and to the Gentile nations who have contact with them.

This IS God's mission to the world – He will gradually reveal Himself to a spiritually blind humanity who can't get to Him because...we can't see! So God, through the people of Abraham, will show Himself for who He is...Ross Blackburn has titled his recent scholarly study of Exodus, *The God Who Makes Himself Known*. It's good to keep that title in mind!

Today, we see that MISSION of God take a leap forward as the Israelites face another merciful impasse... actually a series of three dead ends that bring to the surface... some of the spiritual stuff from the depths. It turns out (and this is always the case) that as God is revealed, we also are revealed and the Israelites are getting to know God AND themselves!

What comes out of these beleaguered souls (only about 45 days out of Egypt) is bitterness. They feel under pressure and they begin looking for someone to blame (Don't we DO that? Look for someone to blame!) and the most convenient target for this bitterness, accusations, quarreling and grumbling is our man Moses. It's a little like blaming the weatherman for the weather. And it's all a case study and vivid revelation of a dynamic in our OWN souls – our propensity toward blaming and complaining and bitterness, that is ultimately (whether we see it or not) ultimately aimed at God.

Lets look at: 1) Bitterness 2) God's Peculiar Response and 3) What Happens When We Grasp the Response (or, better, when IT gets hold of us).

A Christianity Today book-of-the-year from several years back has had a huge impact on my thinking; it's called *Bold Love* by Dan Allender and Tremper Longman. It's really an exploration of forgiveness.

And at one point one of the writers (one a Hebrew scholar, the other a Psychologist) one talks about some of the very mundane, low-level, often ignored ways we feel bitterness...and THEN discusses the ultimate object/target of that ordinary/unexamined annoyance. When we feel like we HAVE to blame someone but there's no one to blame!

He buys a pair of socks...is excited to put them on... he peels off the paper sticker...and finds a plastic sock-connector-thing ...and sort of pulls at it...and it's stronger than he thought...then gives a little tug...still nothing...and finally...in a little burst of frustration or aggravation or annoyance, yanks the socks apart... and "voila" – he's happy! But then he notices a little hole in

his new socks... it's gonna be a run... start of an unraveling...and before he even wore them once!

And THAT kind of experience (happens everyday!) ...is really an experience of low-grade bitterness at the way things are set-up. We're annoyed at having to get a scissors... It's not really rational... it's not unreasonable that the socks be packaged that way... but we walk away...ticked-off...frustrated...bitter. It's like we have a quarrel with the Universe...a quarrel with the way things are set up...a resentment at the One who has set it up.

And when we complain (as I often catch myself doing) about the weather in November that is still hot and muggy... I deserve to see the leaves change color! Who are we complaining against... it's not the weatherman who makes the weather...man.

And we may rarely get to the place where we lift our fist in the air and curse heaven...but lots of times when we experience the frustrations and annoyances of life... and we growl or sigh or curse or moan... isn't ultimately against the One who "orders all things according to the counsel of His will"?

Our emotions often give us away...when we're pressed or the word used here "tested" our feelings come to the surface and expose what's going on in our souls... "I don't like how things are set up...and I have a beef with whoever it is that SET IT UP..." Well, remember, the weather man doesn't make the weather... and we may find all these intermediaries to blame...and secondary causes... but ultimately... aren't we really mad at the ultimate Cause Himself.

And Israel has lost the luxury of blaming secondary causes... God has shown up...He is leading them... the Pillar of Cloud and Fire led them to these lakes but the water is poison! But they dare not shake their fists at God... so they blame the weather man (Moses) and God responds by turning the bitter waters sweet. Then they got a vacation at a desert spa (12 springs and all the dates they could eat – the ancient equivalent to Halloween candy!)... but then they had to move on...because God was moving in the Pillar...

Then they have no food... but they can't blame the way we would (blame it on Publix or Winn Dixie or Walmart) because it's EVIDENTLY God who is in control (there are NO illusions – they can't escape that conclusion!)... but they can't bring themselves to say what they really mean, "I don't like how God is running the show! I disagree with God... I resent God and the way He is governing my life... I hate Him." So... they blame Moses (and this time) Aaron too.

But WE see about THEM – so clearly – what we don't see about ourselves: they're blaming the wrong person. It's so clear that it's not Moses running the show – it's GOD! They'd rather lynch Moses! They can't be honest about the real object of their resentment.

Can WE?

At the end of the Book of Job...after that suffering man has heard all the accusations of his so-called friends (fiends!) "Job, if you're suffering THIS much, you must've done something to deserve it!" And Job launches into a lengthy self-righteous defense of his own goodness... Then God speaks to Job and says, "Job, would you condemn ME in order to justify yourself?" And the tragic but unstated answer is, "Yes! If one of us has to take the fall – I'd rather it be YOU God!" It takes a lot to bring Job to that honest place!

Martin Luther was asked by his confessor, "Martin, have you loved God?" and Luther the monk replied, "I was myself more than once driven to the very abyss of despair so that I wished I had never been created. Love God? I hated him!"

I know we don't admit it (especially in church) and we would rather blame anyone else...rather blame the weather man than the One who really makes the weather...and I haven't even talked about the bigger stuff like terrorism...and disasters and senseless crimes that God COULD HAVE PREVENTED...and cancer and car-wrecks...

But 45 days into the journey the people are blaming Moses but their REAL quarrel is with God. The last verse articulates their actual charge, "Is the LORD among us or NOT?!" Because frankly, we could do a better job running this operation than He is – if I'm being honest, I think He should step aside and we'll step in – we'll take over! We'll substitute for Him – is He with us or NOT?

So YHWH, Israel's Husband and Lord of the Promise, He tells Moses to gather the elders and the people and says these VERY PECULIAR WORDS... it's evidently a grammatical error, "Moses, take your rod – the symbol of judgment/justice with which you struck the Nile (and it turned to blood) and I will stand before you..."

"I'm sorry Lord: you mean WE will stand before YOU, right? Because the accused always stands before the Judge...right? You didn't mean YOU would stand before ME...I will stand before You, the King/Judge... right?"

"No...I will stand before YOU...I will face the charges that the people are making against YOU... IT'S REALLY ME...I'm the One they doubt, they question, they suspect, they RESENT. "Is the LORD among us or NOT?!" SO I WILL STAND IN THE DOCK – in the place where the accused stands and the Rod of Justice will fall on ME... strike the Rock...and out of My being judged in your place...water will come, water, refreshment and life."

YOU think YOU will take My place...but I will take YOUR place... I will face the lawsuit, the trial and I will be JUDGED in your place.

And this is, I hope you saw it, this is one of the clearest places in the Hebrew Bible where the nature of the Gospel is seen. In Jesus Christ, God agrees to take the justice we deserve. The Apostle Paul saw it very clearly when in 1 Corinthians 10.4 he wrote of that Exodus generation, “they all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ.”

God answers the charge – Is the LORD among us or not? And by this judicial proceeding He shows, “I am AMONG you and My intentions for you are GOOD and only good... I am so committed to you that I would rather be condemned in YOUR PLACE than lose you...”

AND while this scene in the desert is peculiar and only figurative we see this TRUTH most clearly in the Cross of Jesus Christ – we are there, humanity stripped of all pretense, gathered at the foot of the awful Tree, hurling insults and spitting at God who hangs on the Cross. He is loving us to death. He is taking the rod of judgment. He is among us as Jesus Christ the God-Man. His is the Tree thrown into the Bitter Waters of our resentments and our sin and He absorbs our judgment and the waters of death become life-giving and sweet. He is the manna come down from heaven to give life to the world.

And the way this changes our approach to life is that when we see it...when we taste it...when we get a sense of it on our hearts, we lose our suspicion of God. We begin to see that while we can't always understand WHY the socks had to rip...or the weather had to be bad...or that crime or cancer or car-wreck had to take place... when He moves us from Elim (those perfectly good springs and all those dates!) – while we can't always figure it out...STILL, in Jesus Christ, WE KNOW THAT GOD CAME AMONG US...came for us... was born they way we were ...and He has committed Himself to us INFINITELY.

He is NOT aloof from our suffering...He stepped into it...even into the place of the accused (the Dock). He took the just accusations of the Law against US and He even took OUR unjust accusations against Him – our insults and abuse and showered in spit.

I have to see that and know that if that vein of bitterness and god-ward hatred that runs through every one of us, if that's going to be dismantled...if my bitterness is going to turn sweet, the Tree has to come in...the Cross of Jesus Christ has to enter my thinking.

I may not be able to figure it out...when little annoyances grip me (ugh!)...when senseless acts of violence and accidents and disease strike...I may not know how to explain WHY an almighty God didn't stop it...but when I see God, in Jesus Christ, taking the justice that I deserved and suffering WITH us...for us...THEN I can say, “the government is on His shoulders and that's where I want it! I can trust a God like that to govern my life...my children...my marriage, my work-life and even the whole outcome of HISTORY!”

Speaking of that generation and the God who was making Himself known to them, the Prophet

Isaiah wrote these words: So He became their Savior. In all their affliction He was afflicted, and the angel of His presence saved them; in His love and in His mercy He redeemed them, and He lifted them and carried them all the days of old. (63.8-9).

The Communion

11.1.15

There's a warning in the NT about taking the Lord's Supper in the wrong way – Paul “whoever wrongly judges the Body (i.e. the church).” You can read it in 1 Corinthians 11... Our understanding of that is that you must be a regular member of some church (NOT necessarily THIS one - NOT necessarily THIS one - NOT necessarily THIS one) but to stay aloof from the church and not connected is to misunderstand the nature of the Church (to wrongly discern the Body) and a basic truth of Christianity. So, please stay with us, maybe pray or meditate, but if you don't belong to some church, please don't take the Bread and Wine when it comes to you...I'd love LOVE to help you get ready the next time...

So, this passage ends with the basic statement of the charges – “Is the LORD among us or NOT?” (17.7) It's something WE have all felt...the suspicion that God is NOT there, that God is absent, aloof...unconcerned.

The judicial proceedings answer the charges saying, “Yes! Not only am I among you but I would rather be condemned than to lose you...that's how committed to YOU I AM! Those are My intentions for you.”

And that's exactly what this Bread and Wine are saying to us, “I am present (“THIS IS MY BODY... THIS IS MY BLOOD...”) The Spiritual has become SUBSTANTIAL and God is among us...here...now at this Table.

And here we see that in Jesus Christ, God is so committed to us that He would do anything to have us... He would be crushed like grapes in order to quench our thirst... He would be ground like wheat in order to be OUR BREAD...Jesus Christ said, “I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread, which comes down out of heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread also which I will give for the life of the world is My flesh.” (John 6.48-51)

We can laugh at ourselves when we get annoyed (at socks and rainy days) and when we weep, we can hear our Father weeping with us...in all our affliction, He has entered in... “The LORD is indeed among us...” and we hear that most clearly here.

Let's pray.

