

## The Bitter Waters of Marah

I am preparing a report with testimonial photographs of the most relevant milestones in the Exodus route that we followed some time ago on one of our trips to Egypt to transfer the ALMA Marriage Encounter to the Kash El Deborah church in Cairo.

We visited Mount Sinai where Moses received the Ten Commandments, written on stone tablets by the finger of God.

Pilgrims and tourists from around the world begin their ascent at midnight from the plains of Saint Catherine's Monastery, the place where it is thought that God called Moses through the burning bush. Under the light of the stars, guided by a young Bedouin, I had the opportunity of scaling the rocky path. It took six continuous hours to arrive at the top where we waited expectantly for the exciting spectacle of the dawn.

Once the sun arose, the descent began immediately. The intensity of the heat of the day does not allow any other option to reach the top for those not born in these climes.

I will also illustrate the multiple variety of the desert that the Israelites crossed from the fertile land of Goshen in the Nile Delta to Mount Sinai, defying every type of danger and uncertainty, and comment on some spiritual principles that lend themselves to the first chapters of Exodus and the applications that they have for contemporary life.

I invite you to open your Bible and heart to the book of Exodus chapter 15. There we find the song that Moses sang after crossing the Red Sea.

While we were singing hymns of gratitude and praise to God at the beginning of this worship service, I imagined how intense the fervor and emotion of those families must have been as they sang after seeing the manifestation of God's power and glory when they were trapped between the desert and the sea, threatened by death, as Moses extended his rod and the waters ceased to flow so the people could cross on dry ground. Nevertheless, when the army and horsemen of Pharaoh try to do the same, they are stopped by a divine breath which causes the wheels of the carts to stick in the mud and leaves the multitude of armed adversaries who were pursuing them buried under the waters.

In such a critical situation they broke out in spontaneous song. Miriam, Moses' sister, took a tambourine and the women danced and sang with her, adding to the emotional praise resulting from this miracle.

After this epic event, the people continue their march for three days through the desert until the water in their canteens is exhausted. In those dry and desolate areas, distressed and afflicted, they see water in the distance. They approach, making the effort to arrive there, but when they taste it, to alleviate their thirst and to recover their strength, they realize that the water is bitter, undrinkable. We are going to read and comment on this incident in the crossing of the desert.

Let us remember that Moses kept a record of the entire journey according to what he says in Numbers 33. He took note of every one of the camps where they stopped when the cloud was detained and broke camp when the cloud was lifted. This continued until they arrived at the shores of the Jordan River a year later.

Yesterday, studying it again and reviewing the story, I noticed that from the departure of the people from Rameses in Egypt to their arrival three months later to camp at the foot of Sinai, there were twelve stops. Each place is duly identified.

Twelve times, they journeyed into unknown and unforeseen places where they camped trusting in divine guidance in the form of a cloud by day and a column of fire by night – a beautiful and encouraging example of what it means to be guided by God in crossing this land even in the midst of adversities and the difficulties that we must face.

The event we are talking about happened at the fourth camp, at the waters of Marah. They stopped four times and the cloud did not move for several days in each of the places. Let's read from verse twenty-two and following. In Exodus chapter fifteen, the Word of the Lord says:

*<sup>22</sup> 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.*

*<sup>23</sup> When they came to Marah, they could not drink its water because it was bitter.  
(That is why the place is called Marah.)*

*<sup>24</sup> So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "What are we to drink?"  
<sup>25</sup> 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.***

*There the LORD made a decree and a law for them, and there he tested them.*

*<sup>26</sup> 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."*

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

Those of you who received the open letter that I sent from those places (see the index "Waking Up in Sinai") where I related how we left at dusk to cross the desert, spending hours following the curves and kilometers of sand and rocks. When it was already dark the headlights of the vehicle began to illuminate the palm trees, first as shadows then as beautiful palm trees. The following morning as we returned, we confirmed in the guide books that we carried with us and with some help from my wife, that this was the Oasis known as Elim, where the people camped by the fountains of water close to Mount Sinai.

What an important lesson this passage teaches. God had a purpose for His people, as He has for your life. There are times when the Lord permits us to pass through adverse situations where our faith is tried, just as it happened to them on that occasion.

They all knew that they had a goal, that there was a purpose – arriving at the promised land, the land that flowed with milk and honey, where they were going to establish themselves after four hundred years of slavery and suffering, where they endured ignominy and lashes. Now they were having the opportunity of gaining their liberty

Previously they were all witnesses of the powerful liberating hand of the Lord before them: the plagues that were manifest due to the hardness and blindness of Pharaoh, the waters of the sea that opened and closed over the army that pursued them. With the danger of death dispelled due to the annihilation of their adversaries, they walked three days until they ran out of water, arriving at Marah with high hopes, only to find the water bitter.

The reaction of the people, take note, Christian, was not 'Lord, what shall we do now? How are you going to deliver us from this?' It was not to kneel before God nor call out in the spirit of prayer and unity, asking for help and orientation from on high, but immediately complaints poured forth,

murmuring against God and their leaders. Does it not seem like a common reaction in these days as well?

What are we going to drink? Why did you bring us here, Moses? What do you intend to do with us? They complained strongly against him. Moses as spiritual leader explains that it is not his responsibility. This problem was not his fault.

I didn't bring you here. It wasn't my idea. I was peacefully caring for my father-in-law's sheep when God called me to carry out this mission. I am not the one who dyed the waters of the Nile red, nor the one who ordered darkness over the entire land of Egypt for three days except in the homes of the Israelites. It was not I who opened the sea so we could pass through.

It was God with His wonders, signs and purposes. So cry out to God. God calls the people to holiness and deals with them in an individual way.

Generally people tend to confuse the demands of God in their spiritual life with the one who is pastoring the church and instead attack him who is watching out for their souls.

Moses then fervently cried out and God showed him a tree, perhaps a thorn, an insignificant bush like those few that grow in the desert almost without casting a shadow, a scrawny stick like any other. Nevertheless, he took the indicated tree, cast it into the waters and the waters became sweet so the people could then refresh their bodies, calm their thirst, recover their spirits, and dissipate their anguish at least for a time, in order to continue on to the next stop which was the oasis with 70 palm trees.

It is interesting what he adds, continuing in the next verse:

*<sup>25</sup> 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.  
**There the LORD made a decree and a law for them, and there he tested them.***

Recently we saw some families who testified to a trial that God had permitted them to pass through, and how that adversity had strengthened and united them as a family, bringing them to recognize and abandon inadequate situations that were nested in the depths of their hearts.

That is where man's principal problem is found. As long as one does not discover how to recognize and heal what is hidden in his heart, all the rest is useless.

**And there he tested them**

*<sup>26</sup> He said, "If you listen carefully to the voice of the LORD your God  
and do what is right in his eyes,*

What do we have to drink? Why did you bring us here?

The trial allowed the weakness of the people to float to the top, the fragility of their faith, the inconsistency of their thoughts, affections and will. Once that problem is evident, we can look for the solution, see the exhortation to integrity. Listen *attentively* to the Word, not superficially, not closing our ears when it reprimands us, unmasks us or exhorts us to practice what God demands. That implies doing the right thing. Don't be hearers of the Word only, but doers of it, says James in the New Testament reinforcing this same concept.

*pay attention to his commands, and keep all his decrees*

Are you keeping all God's decrees?

Are there perhaps some areas of your life that are marginalized that you do not want to submit to the Lord? Are there some things in your heart that need to be exposed to the Word of God and which require obedience to that Word?

Of course the Lord permits everyone to experience trials so that our obedience will be complete, integral, total, and thus we will be careful to keep all His statutes.

*I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians,  
for I am the LORD, who heals you."*

*<sup>27</sup> Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs and seventy palm trees.*

Once faced with the reality of their inner life they could camp in a precious Oasis.

I wonder, and I ask you the question, dear reader, for whom am I presently staying up late at night polishing these words? 'Marah' means bitter. What are the principal sources of bitterness? What are the reasons you have bitterness in your heart?

One of the most sensitive areas that makes a man bitter is the family circle – when there are conjugal crises, problems between parents and children, emotional problems, economic problems, broken relationships, abuses, etc. The family is a sensitive source where there is the propensity for complaints, murmurings, and bitterness. Conflicts in the home are not resolved. Arguments, insults, lack of understanding escalate in intensity and depth. It is symptomatic that one of the major problems related to violence is located in the bosom of the family.

Today the high degree of family violence in contemporary society is coming to light, even in our country. Perhaps it is not a new thing but today it is front-page news. The supposed love suddenly turns to hatred, even aggression, resulting in the death of persons who have lived together. How can there be such a drastic change so quickly? We have seen violence between parents and children, between husband and wife. The primary motive for bitterness is found in the family circle. I invite you during this reflection, this analysis, to see if you have in your heart any resentment, situations that are embittering your family life. It may be that you cannot recognize it in your present reality, but perhaps in another stage of your life. Search your soul with honesty. Perhaps your bad character has developed from there, your aversion to certain people, your unconfessed grudges. Perhaps you are a single woman and this leads you into solitude and frustration.

Proverbs says that a foolish son is a sorrow to his father and bitterness to her who gave him birth. At times certain attitudes of the children, reluctance, laziness, negligence, apathy, arrogance, the lack of respect toward the parents generate a deep pain in the paternal heart that can push them into bitterness. There are also the fights among brothers and sisters, a bad marriage, a single life badly managed, etc.

As an example, we have the case of Jacob when his son Esau married Judith the daughter of Beerli the Hitite and Bashemath the daughter of Elon the Hitite.

*They were a source of grief to Isaac and Rebekah.*

Esau's parents, upon verifying the unlawful marriage of one of their children, and seeing him make decisions contrary to the Lord's commands, suffered the consequences within the family environment, embittering his mother, who fell into a depression and anguish so profound she lost the desire to live. And Rebekah said to Isaac:

*I'm disgusted with living because of these Hittite women.  
If Jacob takes a wife from among the women of this land, from Hittite women like these,  
my life will not be worth living.*

If her other son were to follow the same path, she would lose all the sense, all the desire, to continue living in this world.

In cases of sterility, such as occurred with Sarah, Hannah and others, there is reflected the depth of conflicts generated by not resolving them with wisdom and dependence on God.

So then, beloved Christian, the principal causes of bitterness can come from within the family.

Hence God has been concerned from the beginning of the human race with strengthening marriage and the family, because that is the most sensitive area of human life. I urge you once more to be reconciled with your family, to make every effort possible in prayer, in fasting, in crying to God so that your family situation can become orderly, restored, reestablished. And to those who are not married, that you may know how to live a consecrated single life.

Another common cause of bitterness is when you have expectations different from the purposes of God and you are surprised by situations that are the product of divine sovereignty, such as happens with the death of a child or widowhood.

Psychologists agree that bitterness often develops when one has walked with a spouse for many years and suddenly he or she dies or a child dies. It is natural that with the passing of the years the children must eventually bury their parents, but many times the opposite occurs.

At 30 years of age one of my brothers suddenly died by drowning in Chiloé. I never saw my father so broken as he was in the occasion when he had to bury a son. On the way to the funeral he said, I am not prepared for this. My parents had twelve children. He could have had greater comfort; nevertheless his deep paternal love drew him into that natural desolation.

Sudden death can be another cause of bitterness. God always has a purpose in what he does or permits, even though we many not understand at the time. You should be careful that these situations do not fill your heart with bitterness.

Remember Naomi who emigrated due to the famine that fell upon Bethlehem and its surrounding territory. She went to another place with her husband and three children looking for new horizons. In those far-off lands she lost her husband and three children. The story in the book of Ruth tells us how she returned years later with her daughter-in-law. When she arrives at the city, the people comment, "Isn't that Naomi?" To which she responds, *"Don't call me Naomi. Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me."*

Her husband probably made a bad decision in fleeing from the trial due to the famine in Bethlehem, possibly to avoid God's judgment on their lives in those circumstances, but it resulted in worse consequences for him, his wife and all their family.

Thus drastic changes in the family or economic situation can be a source of bitterness: widowhood, sudden death, separation (which is like a death when the husband leaves home and abandons his wife for another woman, generally younger, is like a death situation). Generally separations are very complex situations, very difficult to bear, and require great spiritual strength and closeness to the Lord.

**Catastrophic illnesses** are another cause that may generate bitterness. Experiencing a sudden loss of health definitely changes your physical reality. You have seen it in your own family circle. We all know of these situations, how suddenly an exam, a diagnosis, radically alters present and future reality.

When the young King Hezekiah experienced one of these terminal illnesses, he complained like a thrush and moaned like a dove. Do you know how the dove moans? Have you listened to its whine?

*I cried like a swift or thrush, I moaned like a mourning dove.  
My eyes grew weak as I looked to the heavens. I am troubled; O Lord, come to my aid!"  
But what can I say? He has spoken to me, and he himself has done this.  
I will walk humbly all my years because of this anguish of my soul.*

He knew how to humble himself. He cried out in honesty. He knew how to approach the God of Heaven with the bitterness that was generated by his mortal illness, and God had mercy on him and granted him another fifteen years of life - pure mercy and grace, the fruit to the King's own prayer. Many times constant and sincere prayer can change things.

Situations such as unemployment and lack of job security are also causes of bitterness - abrupt changes from wealth to poverty. Saint Paul says

*I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.  
I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty.  
I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation,  
whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.*

Thus in abundance or in want, you know what the text adds:

***I can do everything through him who gives me strength.***

Abundance, scarcity, illness, widowhood, singleness – how important it is to be close to the Lord. Perhaps you have seen one of your causes for bitterness reflected in some of the examples we have described since they are very common.

But there is a situation that has to do with believers, Christians. All the others can happen to any human being, a believer in God or not, but among those who know God there are some that live in the flesh and not in the Spirit. The carnal life brings bitterness. They see with frustration how other newer Christians progress, are used by the Lord, take responsibilities, are recognized by the congregation, are elected by their peers while they themselves are marginalized, often incapable of recognizing their inner reality and consequently resort to criticism and complaints.

When the people of Israel see themselves threatened by the Babylonian army, the prophet Jeremiah explains to them the cause of divine judgment, of discipline for the two evil things they had done: they had forsaken the Lord to go after idols and had dug for themselves broken cisterns that would not hold water.

What does it mean to dig for themselves broken cisterns? They left me, their source of living water, preferring a desert life represented by the cisterns, the wells that do not retain water.

Water is a vital element. One cannot live without it. You see that for humanity one of the greatest problems generated by wars past and present is the problem of water: the contamination of water, the scarcity of water to drink and for irrigation. The Middle East is dynamite. Certainly there are great

problems in Israel, in Palestine, not only because of historical tradition, but also because there is the concrete problem of water in order to survive in those regions where it is mainly desert.

They left me, the source of living water, of eternal water, of fresh water, and dug for themselves wells, cisterns, water wheels that do not retain the water. To live in the flesh, to depart from the precepts of God, to live the spiritual life frivolously, is to dig wells that do not retain the water. Perhaps they provide them with water a couple of times but these cisterns are not capable of conserving it. The only way to be remain faithful to God is to be closely united to Him and subject to Him. Without subjection to the Lord, without obedience to the Lord, there is no way to have full victorious lives. Carnality generates this problem.

Later, Jeremiah warns how God severely punishes the rebels. Their own attitude condemns them. Consider this, dear reader, how evil and bitter it is for you having left the Lord your God and return to Him right now.

Sometimes people have been seated listening attentively to the Word of God, or reading as you are, when suddenly they start to dig cisterns. They withdraw from God and time passes. When questioned or they hear comments, they say they are fine, happy.

Can one be happy apart from God?

Usually it is in the early days of their departure that these comments are made, and they make it their business to let the congregation know that they are very well off without Christ. But I assure you, and history confirms it, that as the days and months go by, as the years mount up, the bitterness in their heart , the frustration, the resentment, will be such that their entire being will be sick, many times contaminating their family and scandalizing those who trusted them and saw them previously in the Lord's way.

Consider well this warning courageously expressed by this servant writer, especially directed to you at this time: never leave Christ the Lord, obey all His precepts, and guard your heart, because bitterness is a hindrance to the grace of God.

*See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that  
no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.*

Ephesians says to put away all bitterness. Have you read that in the Scripture? Put away from you now, immediately, in the name of Jesus ask God to take from your heart all bitterness, to pull out those roots from below that contaminate. Perhaps they are not even visible. The contamination is underground like poison waters. May they be eradicated, pulled up by the roots.

Lord, as you did with the indicated tree in the desert, touch our hearts and transform the bitterness into sweetness. Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world, eliminate from the reader every root of bitterness that may have come from any one of these elements that we have cited, or others: family, death, sickness, unemployment, pain from tribulation, singleness, anguish or their own carnality.

Perhaps you do not want to recognize or have not realized that you are digging broken cisterns. You are working hard but are not subject to the hand of the Lord. I invite you not to do as the Chosen People did so many times on the Exodus route, which resulted in an entire generation dying in the desert as punishment, but to follow the example of Hannah, of Naomi, of Ruth, who when faced with situations of adversity cried to the Almighty. With bitterness of soul I cried to Jehovah, and wept abundantly.

Hannah could not have children and poured out her heart to God, poured out her anguish before the Lord. She recognized her situation and God had mercy on Hannah and Samuel was born. Similarly with Naomi, Ruth, and a multitude of other persons: they prayed to the Lord and obtained comfort and a solution to their problem. I invite you to pray personally to the Lord to take all the bitterness out of your heart and to receive peace, hope, new strength to continue your journey through this valley. If you are walking in the flesh, ask forgiveness, repent, and make a commitment to seek the Lord and to always obey Christ and his Word.

Amen.

*Lic. Francisco Javier Rivera Mardones*

*Translation: Joan Meger*