

Exodus 15:22-27 - 26 April 2026

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Preacher: Simon Rehberg

[0 : 0 0] This is the Word of God. We are continuing, or better, you are continuing your way through the book of Exodus, just like the Israelites are continuing their journey to the promised land through the desert, through the wilderness offshore. And I hope my sermon won't be as dry as the conditions that they are experiencing there, which actually brings us straight away to the problem that we see here in this text, and that is dryness. They have a problem. Last week, Donald preached about the song of praise that Moses sang after God had led the Israelites through the Red Sea and drowned the Egyptians who were chasing after them. And immediately after this has happened, the Israelites are happy, right? They sing a song of praise. They are walking on dry ground again. And who knows, maybe they expected at this point that, well, now it's going to be easy. You know, we just walk down the promenade of Israel. We walk, we see the sights. But as it happens, they are facing problems pretty quickly again, because they are people, physical people like you and I. They are walking through the wilderness, and soon they realize they are out of water. For three days, they have not found any water. Of course, they would have had, you know, some water with them in their skins. They would have taken some provisions. But they slowly become concerned. You know, they have to drink. And not only they have to drink, but their animals also have to drink. They need water for absolutely everything, to cook, to survive, to wash. So they are concerned.

Very legitimately so, I would say. Suddenly, though, they see water in the distance, and they think we are safe. Finally, we have come to a place where we can refresh ourselves. We can stock up on water again.

And you can imagine their relief as they see water in the distance. And you can feel the frustration as they realize when the first person takes a sip of water that it's bitter and undrinkable.

You can imagine the frustration that they would have, the questions in their minds that they would have. Why? Why, God, would you lead us out of Egypt? Why would you split the Red Sea for us just to let us die of thirst in the wilderness? And that leads us to our first point. I've got three points today, just like a good Reformed preacher does. You learn that in seminary. So the first thing I want to talk about is the people of Israel and their attitude that they have, because they grumble. It's very easy for us today in the 21st century to read this account of the Exodus story and to turn the page and to say, yeah, why are you so dramatic? It's all cool. Like, God saves you, right? Don't be so dramatic about it.

But that is not what they would have experienced. They would have been in real trouble. You know, they are out of water. And if you think about it for a minute, you will realize that often you and I are not much better than the Israelites here. Don't we so often ask ourselves as well, why is God letting this happen just now? Why is He allowing for these circumstances to come into my life and to make my life difficult? After one crisis is averted, why is the next crisis just around the corner? So let's pause on this for a moment and let's think about what's happening, because they are at this place called Mara. And Mara, we learn in this text, means something like bitter. It comes from the Hebrew word mar. So if you actually, if you're called Mary or Mari, your name means bitter, which doesn't mean that your personality has to be bitter. But it is a problem. The people are thirsty.

[4 : 3 4] Overall, after all, we are physical creatures. We are made from the ground. We are not just souls floating around. So we need water. So the fact that the people don't have water is an issue here.

And the fact that the people address this problem to Moses is also fine. That's not a problem. But the way in which they address it is problematic. Verse 24, the people grumbled against Moses. They grumbled against him. You can see the irony here. Just a few verses before, they sing this great song of praise. And as Donald said last week, Miriam is telling us to keep on singing the song

of praise.

Jesus. And as soon as the next crisis appears, it's all gone. They grumble. They don't pray. They don't sing. They don't say to Moses, Moses, you see, God has been so good and faithful towards us.

He has saved us from all our enemies. Would you be so good and just ask him to help us here? Surely he will not fail us now. Would you be so good and talk to him to make sure we are okay? [5 : 50] That's not what the Israelites are doing. They grumble. They didn't even grumble against God. They grumbled against Moses. Interesting detail. Moses must have thought, calm down everyone. I'm thirsty too, okay? This is not my fault. And perhaps there's a little, just a side note here, don't grumble against your minister when he's not the one responsible for what's happening. I feel like ministers can often identify with Moses. But this grumbling, let's think about it. It's an interesting phenomenon, especially in the story of Exodus.

We will see, or you will see that as you go through this book during the next weeks and months, that it will happen again and again and again. The word grumble in the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for it, it only appears about 15 times in the entire Old Testament. And 14 of these times, it's in connection with the Israelites on their way to the Promised Land. They are a grumbling people. But this grumbling is not a new phenomenon, because I believe it's almost as old as humanity itself. Since the fall, people have been having this attitude of grumbling about all sorts of things. Because of jealousy, for example, we think about Cain and Abel, or we think about Esau and Jacob, or maybe Joseph's brothers against Joseph. There's a lot of grumbling, just people being unhappy with what is happening in their life. We see that people have expectations that are unfulfilled, and that makes them question God's goodness, God's plan. For example, Lot's wife, as she leaves Sodom, she turns around, she's not happy that she has to leave. And there are many, many more examples throughout the Old Testament.

But what is this grumbling all about that we see here? I believe that at the heart of this, the reason for this grumbling is a disappointment of an expectation that says, if I walk with God, everything will be easy. If I walk with God, everything will be smooth.

If I walk with God, everything will be comfortable. Sometimes we can have that expectation. This expectation, sometimes we hear it as a voice in our minds. I think all of us have had this moment before where we say, why, if I am saved, is life still hard? Why, if I am saved, do I still experience trials and suffering? Why, if I am saved, do I still have to wrestle with the sinful habits in my life?

[8 : 55] Why is my wish for a relationship unanswered? Why doesn't God allow me to have children? Why is God leading me to some waters only for me to find out that they are bitter waters and I can't drink them?

I am dying of thirst. And this thirst that the Israelites experience here in a very biological nature, we so often experience in emotional and spiritual ways. Do you know this experience, these questions? When your experience of your Christian life, your Christian walk with God, don't match up with the expectations you had of what it would be like? One way of dealing with these expectations is the way the Israelites have been dealing with them. You grumble. You go around, you complain. You grumble either against God or you grumble against your minister or you grumble against your friends. Or perhaps you say, I'm a good Christian, I'm not allowed to grumble. So you internalize this grumbling and you adopt that same posture and you find yourself sitting in church thinking, I don't really want to be there. I don't feel joyful this morning. When is the sermon finally done? I finally want my Sunday roast. The mistake we can make is so similar to the mistake the people of Israel are making here. And the problem really is that they are suffering from short-term amnesia. They're forgetful.

They're like a goldfish with a nine-second brain, nine-second memory. We forget in the same way what God's character is like. And it's a good thing that God reminds us of it. That's why we go to church every Sunday after Sunday after Sunday, to be reminded of God's promises. And we will say more about God's character in a second. For now, just one thing I want to mention about how we can deal with that grumbling, hard posture that we adopt sometimes. We need to be people who think long-term. And by that, I mean in both directions, to the future and to the past. The people here in the wilderness, they were so forgetful that God had literally just saved them from slavery. God had actually sent 10 plagues. They had seen it with their own eyes. He had taken them out of Egypt. He had split, he divided the Red Sea for them. They had seen that the blood of the lamb on their doorposts saved their firstborns from the angel of death.

You read this and you think, how can you forget so quickly? Do you really think God is going to let you die of thirst? But then again, we aren't too different to this. Even though we have more of an advantage. Okay, we haven't experienced God like they did with their own senses and their own eyes. We haven't seen a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire. We haven't seen the plagues. We haven't seen the Red Sea divide in front of us. But maybe that's a good thing, because I don't think being enslaved in Egypt would be a fun life. We have an advantage. We are so privileged to have the Bible, people to read all of this, and to be able to believe that it is true. Not only that, but we live after the cross. We know that Jesus, the Son of God came, lived the life of perfect obedience, died, rose again, and we know the end of the story. We know the revelation about the future, that one day we'll be with God. New creation, new heaven, new earth. When you find yourself grumbling about your life circumstances, know that God hears you. Know that you are not the first people to grumble. Know that

[13:12] He has led you to this point, that He sees you, and know that Jesus Christ was also there with the people of Israel in Egypt, that He was the one who helped them out, that He was the one who provided for them, that He lived, died, and rose again, that He's coming back to put things right, that He knows you and your circumstances, and that He wants to help you as well. That can give us confidence in God's character, confidence that He sees us and cares us, and it gives us hope that no matter what happens, it is ultimately for our good, and that He has a plan. Think about what He's already done in your life, how far He has brought you along. Where were you a year ago? Where were you 10 years ago? Where were you 50 years ago? Think about what He can do with your life, and well, suffering is part of the journey.

We'll say a little bit more about that now. And a second point, which is the fact that God turns bitterness into sweetness. Because what happens next in this story is remarkable. We don't read about Moses telling the people of Israel to shut up. We don't read about God asking, why are they doubting me so quickly? No, we read that Moses hears the complaints of his people, and he cries out to God, and then we get half a verse. That's quite interesting. Half a verse that, by the way, God showed Moses a log, he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet. This is not the first time that God has used Moses to perform something supernatural, and Moses has seen it before, you know, his staff doing all sorts of things when God gives it the power to do so, you know, turning into a snake or dividing the sea, splitting the sea. Moses had seen the burning bush, so he doesn't doubt God for a second, and he throws the log into the water and becomes drinkable. And isn't that almost ironic or funny that as soon as the wood touches the water, as soon as the first person puts the water into their mouth, they must have been overtaken by gratitude, and then perhaps as well by guilt and shame that they doubted God. Why did I doubt you, Lord? I don't know what came over me.

It's like God is saying, I just let you through the waters. I just freed you out of slavery. Do you really think you were going to die of thirst? I'm right here all the time as a pillar of cloud, as a pillar of fire, and you think I'm going to let you die of thirst. Sometimes I believe we trust God in the big things. We struggle to trust God in the small things, the day-to-day provisions that we need from Him. Sometimes when we face a situation where our desire for something outweighs our trust in God, where our expectation is different from what God is actually doing in our lives, we struggle to commit to His plans. We think we know something God doesn't know. We think He has led us to those bitter waters because He is a mean old bully and doesn't want us to be happy. See, sometimes we taste bitterness in life, and it's so real. Sometimes we suffer, and it's so real. I don't think God wants us to be dishonest about that and just say it never happened. But I think God uses these moments to teach us something about Himself, just like He's teaching the Israelites something about Himself in this episode. If we are patient, if we cry out to Him, He will provide the means necessary to turn that bitterness into sweetness.

He doesn't want to bully you. He loves you. And that's what is important to remember here. The reason we are unhappy with God is not necessarily because of our circumstances, but because of our interpretation of these circumstances, if we knew everything that God knows, probably we would understand a little better why He is doing what He is doing. But we don't. And what is happening in these moments is that God requires trust of us trust of you, to trust Him that He knows what is best. He wants to shape you. He wants to lead you.

[18:23] And He uses trials sometimes, as well as really good and spiritual highs where you see Him and you rejoice in Him.

comfort you, and that one day all these trials will flee and there will be sweetness.

Let's come to our third point. We've called it the lesson. God is like a good teacher designing a lesson for the people of Israel here.

We read in verse 25 that the Lord made for them a statute and a rule, and there he tested them, saying, if you will diligently listen to the voice of the Lord your God and do that which is right in his eyes and give ear to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians, for I am the Lord your healer.

We get to the conclusion of this episode. What is it all about? Well, it was a test, a trust exercise, as I said. Have you ever done any of these trust exercises?

[25 : 20] Sometimes they're a bit silly, where someone blindfolds you and leads you around with, you know, you're blindfolded and you have to trust him that you don't run against a wall and get a concussion, or sometimes you have to let yourself fall and people catch you.

That is what God is doing here. It's like he's letting his little child jump from a little height so he can catch the child.

God is teaching his people like a father teaches his son about his character. You see, the people of Israel, they are young as a people.

They don't have their own land. They don't have their own freedom. They do have God, but they don't know much about God yet. So Israel really is a bit like a toddler, like a two-year-old who has to learn what is allowed, what isn't allowed.

They're growing up. They don't know what their father is like. But God is showing them as he is leading them to the promised land by freeing them, by loving them, by testing them, by teaching them.

[26 : 29] He is their healer, he says. He provides water. He's showing them that he is their provider, and he is shaping them as he is leading them.

As we read earlier in Romans 5, God uses trials and suffering sometimes to form your character. Suffering produces endurance.

Endurance produces character. Character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

Here's the good news. God's still doing that today. We, of course, through the Bible, through his revelation, know so much more about God since this story is still in the beginning of the Bible.

But God still uses the same ways of testing us as a teacher and teaching us through these experiences about himself so that we may learn to trust him.

[27 : 33] He's giving the Israelites here a condition, though. That's interesting. If you listen to my voice, if you listen to my voice, if you do what is right, if you give ear to his commandments, he will put none of the diseases on you.

I think that can be difficult sometimes for some of us. If you have attended church for a while, you will have heard the preacher say, it doesn't depend on what you do. It's not about your works for God to save you.

It's about what Christ has done. So how does that fit in? Well, Christianity is, at the end of the day, a religion that is based on works, but as Christians, we believe that it's not dependent on your works. It's depending on Christ's work because we would be unable to do it. We have the privilege, compared to the people of Israel, of living after the cross.

They don't know the good news of Jesus Christ yet, but they know God and his character as he is revealing himself to them. And he is so good.

[28 : 40] He shows them he is faithful. He shows them he is trustworthy. He shows them he will turn bitter waters into sweet water. He shows them he will heal them. But he also demands their obedience.

We are privileged to know Jesus has been obedient, has done it all, and that ought to make us want to be obedient as well, want to follow God and his commandments.

If you are in Christ today, if you have placed your faith in Jesus today, you can be assured that God is for you, that in Christ you are a partaker of all these blessings that God promises here, of all his healing, that Jesus has earned it all for you.

And we see that immediately play out in the last verse, verse 27. Then they came to Elam, where there were 12 springs of water, 70 palm trees, and they encamped there by the water.

I love that the story doesn't just end with the water turning sweet, but that God leads them to a place where they can camp and where there is an abundance of water. 12 springs, hey, you can choose whichever one you like.

[29 : 51] 70 palm trees, shadow for everyone. Maybe not everyone, but at least a few. Fruitful land, fresh waters. What a turn, what a picture.

God doesn't lead you through the desert and through trials just to mock you. He leads you to safe places and to fresh water. And we can take that as a promise, knowing that we will one day be with him in a safe place, with safe water, with fresh water.

On your journey through this world, can you trust with all your heart that God is leading you faithfully, that if trials come, he will provide, that when you feel thirsty, he will quench it, that when your life tastes bitter, he will make it sweet?

Could it be that, like the Israelites, you trust God in the big things, but you struggle to trust him in the small things, in the daily provisions?

Do you mean it when you ask God to give us our daily bread? He will do it. Perhaps not in the way you expect him to, but he will do it. He has done it in the past.

[31 : 01] He will do it again. Let us pray.