

MOSES .. WHO WAS SHOWN  
A SPECIAL TREE

And when they came to Marah, they could not drink of the waters of Marah, for they were bitter. . . And the people murmured against Moses, saying, What shall we drink? And he cried unto the LORD; and the LORD shewed him a tree, which when he had cast into the waters, the waters were made sweet. (Exod. 15:23-25)

people who love trees discover the Bible is an entrancing book; the Scriptures mention various species. There was Deborah's oak (Gen. 35:8), the palm tree of Deborah (Judg. 4:5), and many others. Heathen nations worshipped trees and during times of decadence the children of Israel also placed idols in selected groves. The law said, "He that is hanged is accursed of God" (Deut. 21:23). This was particularly true of Absalom, whose long hair held him in the branches of a tree until Joab's servants slew the renegade prince (2 Sam. 18:15). When God planted the first garden He included special trees, which were known as the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (Gen. 2:9).

John, describing the wonders of the New Jerusalem, spoke of the tree which produced twelve kinds of fruit and yielded a harvest every month (see Rev. 22:2). Zacchaeus climbed a sycamore tree to see Jesus (see Luke 19:4). Elijah, who fled from Jezebel, sat down under a juniper tree (see I Kings 19:4). The Lord, who cursed the fruitless fig tree (see Matt. 21:19), was Himself nailed to a tree (see Acts 5:30). The Jewish people were forbidden to destroy the fruit trees of their enemies (see Deut. 20:19), but perhaps the most amazing tree mentioned in the Bible was the unnamed species that helped Israel to survive during the journey from Egypt to Canaan.

A Crushing Problem ... "They found no water"

"So Moses brought Israel from the Red sea,..., and they went three days in the wilderness, and found no water" (Exod. 15:22). The

27

immense multitude had safely crossed the Red Sea, and was proceeding on the journey to the Promised Land. Traveling at a speed of twelve miles per day, they walked approximately thirty-six miles through the scorching heat of the desert and failed to find water. Probably the people brought supplies from Egypt, but the swiftly diminishing contents of the water skins were causing anxiety; the plight of the thirsty cattle was critical. This was a frightening change from the fertile lands of Egypt. Perhaps many cattle had already died and the future was ominous.

Then suddenly a cry of relief echoed through the camp; the advance guides could see water on the horizon. But "when they came to Marah, they could not drink of the waters of Marah, for they were bitter... And the people murmured against Moses, saying, What shall we drink" (Exod. 15:23-24). It has been estimated that the number of travelers exceeded two million, and to supply refreshment at short notice for such a large multitude necessitated a miracle.

At that time the pillars of cloud and fire were not leading the tribes, but Jehovah, who knew every inch of the inhospitable terrain, could have led them in another direction that might, or might not, have taken them toward more favorable circumstances. Deserts and wildernesses have oases, but they are few and far between. It must be remembered that Jehovah did not send His people to Marah - He led them! Sometimes the most valuable lessons are learned amid adverse conditions. If the children of Israel had bypassed Marah, they would have missed one of the greatest experiences in their history. The poet

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was correct when he wrote

God moves in a mysterious way  
His wonders to perform;  
He plants His footsteps in the sea,  
And rides upon the storm.

A Childlike Prayer... "And he cried unto the LORD"

Moses was a patient and tolerant leader. Men of lesser stature would have been annoyed with the ungrateful people. As they had done, and would continue to do throughout their long march, they blamed their leader for everything unpleasant. Endued by divine power and encouraged by the promises of God, the patriarch had successfully confronted Pharaoh and confounded the pagan magicians. Yet here in the wilderness his difficulties appeared to be insurmountable. There was nothing he could do except pray. When

28

Moses cried unto the Lord a sigh might have been heard in heaven:  
"Like as a father pitieth his children, so the LORD pitieth them that fear him" (Ps. 103:13).

Blessed is the man who prefers praying to pouting! The leader could have resented the accusations and kindled a fire of dissension among his followers. An angry countenance could have stirred emotions to fever pitch, and a lashing tongue would have produced serious reprisals. When Moses prayed the Lord responded immediately. He showed him a tree, and provided humankind with a glimpse of the cross.

A Clear Perception ... "The LORD she wed him a tree"

There is reason to believe the tree had been there all the time. It did not appear overnight as did Jonah's gourd (see Jonah 4:6-7). Probably it was not tall and stately as a redwood tree, nor huge and strong like an oak. It could have been unattractive. There was nothing magical about its formation and appearance, but it was the tree of God's choice. Alone, it could not have performed any miracle, and Moses knew this to be a fact.

Similarly, there was nothing magical about the cross of Calvary. Although churches in Europe display pieces of lumber that they claim were parts of the original cross, the fact remains that the type of tree upon which the Savior died is unknown. Perhaps God withheld that information to prevent the species becoming an object of veneration. The startling but glorious fact about Calvary's cross was not the kind of tree used for the crucifixion, but the miracle that God performed, by, on, and through it. The law taught that cursed were they who were hanged on a tree (see Deut. 21:23). It was the purpose of the Almighty that His beloved Son would be made a curse for us and carry our sins to the cross. The bitterness of life's disappointments and the failure of worldly resources to quench the spiritual thirst of humankind would be removed through the death of Jesus. The poet realized this truth when he wrote

I tried the broken cisterns, Lord,  
But, ah, the waters failed;  
E'en as I stopped to drink they fled,  
And mocked me as I ailed.

Now none but Christ can satisfy:  
None other Name for me.

29

There's love, and life, and lasting joy,

MOSES .. WHO WAS SHOWN A SPECIAL TREE

Lord Jesus, found in Thee.

This is an entrancing truth, but its reality depends upon the grace of God, which reveals it. "God shewed him a tree." Paul wrote, It pleased God. . . to reveal his Son in me" (Gal. 1:15-16). Blessed is every soul who can say, "God showed me a tree!"

A Complete Participation... "He had cast into the waters"

The waters of Marah must have been much more than an oasis in the wilderness. Since two million people and their animals were to be refreshed, the source of supply was more like a lake. God directed the attention of His servant toward the tree, which was either growing close to the water or lying upon the ground. There was no promise of any miracle. Moses saw the tree, but his faith grasped the unuttered promises of the Lord. The patriarch knew divine guidance was behind the revelation, but without faith he could have remained there until the people died. God's miracle was performed only when Moses took the tree and applied it to the place of need. Similarly, gazing at the cross of Christ never saved anybody. The unrepentant thief saw the cross, but he never gained admittance to God's kingdom. Faith that believes the promises of God changes the bitter experiences of life and produces the living water of which Jesus spoke (see John 4:10).

The same truth may be seen in the incident of the borrowed axe. It was written of the servant of Elisha, "But as one was felling a beam, the axe head fell into the water: and he cried, and said, Alas, master! for it was borrowed. And the man of God said, Where fell it? And he shewed him the place. And he cut down a stick, and cast it in thither; and the iron did swim" (2 Kings 6:5-6). Elisha might have looked at the tree, or whatever it was, until the axe head either was swept away in the currents or buried by silt. Faith cut the branch from the tree and applied it to the place of need, and the lost article was brought to the surface.

"Two natural explanations of the text have been attempted: 1) that Elisha passed a piece of wood underneath the axe head, and then lifted it to the surface; 2) that he thrust a stick or piece of wood through the hole in the axe head, and so pulled it out. But both explanations do violence to the text, and we may be sure that if either had been true, the occurrence would never have been recorded. The sacred writers were not concerned to record acts of manual dexterity" (quoted from

30

"2 Kings," The Pulpit Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950], 120).

A Colossal Provision ... "The waters were made sweet"

The extent of this miracle cannot be overestimated; it defies natural explanation. Possibly the Marah area was filled with swamps where water was extremely salty or filled with minerals. Some scholars identify this place with "Am Hawarah," which is forty-seven miles southeast from Suez and approximately seven miles from the Red Sea. There is a large spring in the district where travelers find refreshment.

The Savior may have been thinking of this miracle when He said, "If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water" (John 7:37-38). The restrictive condition may be found throughout the Scriptures. Jesus said, "Let him come unto me." Even God remains away when foolish people are unresponsive to His overtures. The statement, "And there he proved them," sheds light upon the purpose of Jehovah. The words were repeated in Exodus 16:4: ... that I may prove them, whether they will walk in my law, or no." God tested His people to ascertain what motivated their actions. The Hebrews were being prepared for future trials; God was exercising the

MOSES .. WHO WAS SHOWN A SPECIAL TREE

muscles of their faith, and making future conquests possible.

Many attempts have been made to name trees that had the capability of sweetening bitter water, but none of them can be found in the Sinai Peninsula. If, formerly, they grew there, it would explain why God had to indicate which tree Moses should use; the patriarch was not a botanist. However, even the best of the explanations cannot prove how one tree could cleanse enough water to supply the need of a multitude. It is easier to believe the Word of God than to accept the theories of men.

The Continuing Pleasure... "And they came to Elim"

Elim means "a place of refreshment" (see Exod. 15:27). It was an apt name for at the oasis were seventy palm trees and twelve wells. After the oppressive heat and continued thirst in the wilderness, the luxurious conditions were a foretaste of the Promised Land. Traveling south, the tribes had journeyed approximately fifty to sixty miles. They were completely dependent upon God and His servant and had complained about every unpleasant circumstance. Yet, just beyond the horizon, abundant help awaited them. There were towering palm trees,

31

which cast shade upon the ground, twelve wells of refreshing water, and milk from the coconuts offered what appeared to be the elixir of life. God had already planned the sojourn at Elim even when the tribes were complaining at Marah. Some nights appear to be endless, suggesting the dawn of a new day will never arrive. Blessed are the people who see in the dark!

It is difficult for impatient people to wait, especially when they are convinced God moves too slowly. Anxious souls would like to give God a push! The psalmist recognized the importance of patience when he wrote, "Wait patiently for him" (Ps. 37:7). The weary Israelites would have liked to remain at Elim forever; they had forgotten their destination was Canaan. The new conditions were wonderful, but they could not continue solving the nation's problems. Had not the Lord been filled with patience, tolerating the ceaseless complaints would have been impossible. Unfortunately, Israel walked by sight and not by faith. The luscious grapes of Eschol lay ahead, but the nation was looking back and remembering the garlic of Egypt. They were foolish, and so are we if we emulate their example.

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