

The sweet word

by Scott Grant

A scroll like honey

Ezekiel was commanded to speak God's word to the people. It wasn't an easy word, because it contained lamentations, mourning and woe. In a vision, he was given a scroll containing the word of God. The Lord told him: "Son of man, eat what you find; eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel." Ezekiel complied: "Then I ate it, and it was sweet as honey in my mouth" (Ezekiel 2:8-3:3). Feeding on the word of God is compared to eating honey. The word of God is "sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb" (Psalm 19:10). Hearing the word of God and obeying it is the sweetest way to live. There is a sweetness to following the Lord that is beyond comparison. The Israelites learn this in Exodus 15:22-27.

They have just crossed the Red Sea, finally and completely separating themselves from Egypt. Now they're on their own in the wilderness, completely dependent on the provision of the Lord, not Egypt. The first thing they need to learn on their own is that God's word is trustworthy. And that's precisely what the Lord shows them.

Bitter disappointment (15:22-24)

The Lord leads the people to a strange place - the wilderness. The wilderness is an intimidating place. Food and water are scarce. The prospects for the survival of an entire nation don't seem promising. Yet the Lord leads them into the wilderness. Egypt was safe. It was hard, but it was safe. The wilderness isn't safe - which is why the Lord leads them there. He wants to take them to an unsafe place to show them that he himself is the only safe place. He wants to show them that he can be trusted to provide for them, and he wants to teach them to trust him. What better school than the wilderness, where provisions are scarce and the opportunity for trust is optimal?

God led his Son into the wilderness as well: "And immediately the Spirit impelled him to go out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness 40 days being tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts, and the angels were ministering to him" (Mark 1:12-13). In the wilderness, God met the needs of his Son through angels.

The Israelites look for water for three days but can't find any. At this time they must be questioning the Lord: "Where is the God who provides, the God of their father Abraham, who provided a lamb for the offering (Genesis 22:7, 14)? Has he abandoned us? Did he really lead us into the wilderness, or did Moses take a wrong turn?"

Then, in the distance, they spot water. Here's what they must have thought: "How could we have doubted the Lord? Of course, God provides. He hasn't abandoned us. Unquestionably, Moses was following his leading. The Lord indeed is trustworthy!" As they draw near to the waters, they imagine how it will feel to take their first drink after three days in the wilderness. Their bodies are trembling in anticipation of that first sip. But the waters are bitter - undrinkable.

Life in Egypt was bitter (1:15). The Israelites ate bitter herbs as part of the Passover to remember the bitterness of slavery (12:8). Now freedom from Egypt is also bitter. They left one bitter place in life for another bitter place, only this bitter place may result in death by dehydration. At least in Egypt the water was drinkable.

If the Lord is really leading the Israelites, and he is, this has all the appearances of a cruel joke on his part. The Lord knew those waters were there. He knew his people were thirsty. He knew their hopes would be raised.

He knew the waters were bitter. What kind of game is the Lord playing? The place in Hebrew is called Marah, which means "Bitterness." As far as the Israelites are concerned, the name is apt. They are bitterly disappointed. Who among us wouldn't be? They are miserable, desperate and angry.

Anger is a magnet in search of metal, and the closest metal is Moses. After all, it was Moses who led them into the wilderness of no water. So they grumble against Moses. Their grumbling ultimately represents dissatisfaction with the Lord, who is responsible for appointing Moses (16:7-8).

As the Lord led the Israelites into the wilderness, he leads us into the wilderness as well. The scenery in life sometimes can be pretty bleak, and it can be a lot more than three days between watering holes. Our spiritual thirst is palpating. The Lord seems distant, as do friends. We're thirsty for something - anything that offers hope of quenching the unbearable desire of our hearts. We spot something in the distance that offers hope - a new development of some sort, a new friend, the return of an old friend, a potential change in the life of a child, perhaps a special day we've planned. But when we get there, it's like bitter waters. It fails to live up to the hopes we invested in it, and we're bitterly disappointed. And we wonder: "What in the world is God up to? Is he just toying with me? Is he just leading me on? It all seems so cruel." Perhaps like the Israelites, our anger finds an outlet in its direction toward another who let us down.

Several years ago at about this time of year, I was in the wilderness. And I set my sights on one day that I hoped would satisfy my thirst and restore my soul, probably my favorite day of the year - Easter Sunday. The sunrise service at Frost Amphitheater had particularly ministered to me through the years, so my hopes were pinned on it. I was spending the previous night at the house of a friend, who set his alarm and was to wake me, provided that it wasn't raining. When he awoke, he noticed that it was drizzling lightly, and he assumed the service would be canceled, so he went back to sleep and didn't wake me up. Later that day I heard that the service came off as planned under slightly overcast skies. What I had expected to be a day of sweet refreshment was a day of bitter disappointment. Needless to say, my sleepy friend bore the brunt of my disappointment.

Thankfully, the story doesn't end at Marah.

Sweet trust (15:25-26)

The Lord "shows" Moses a tree. The Hebrew verb for "show" (*yarah*) is related to the noun for "law" (*torah*). The root meaning of *yarah* is to throw, cast or shoot. Possibly the noun *torah* was derived from the casting of lots, which revealed the instructions, just as the law reveals the instructions of the Lord. In fact, the base meaning of the noun *torah* is more akin to "instruction" or "teaching." The law of God, then, reveals his instructions. Later, the first five books of the Hebrew scriptures, the Pentateuch, came to be known as the books of the law. So the Lord's showing Moses the tree is connected with his law, or his instruction. This story, then, provides an apt introduction to the second section of Exodus, which concerns revelation, as expressed in the revelation of God's law.

Moses, then, follows the Lord's instructions. The Lord shows him the tree, and he throws it into the bitter waters. The bitter waters then become sweet, or drinkable.

What happens when God's word is followed? The waters become sweet. Obedience to the word of God is sweet. The application of God's word to the bitter waters of life turns them into sweet waters. That doesn't mean that life becomes easy or even that the circumstances change; but if we believe God's word that God he will be with us through those difficult circumstances, there will be a sweetness to life that no circumstances can turn to bitterness. The instructions of the Lord "are sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb" (Psalm 19:10). There is a sweetness to following the Lord, trusting his word.

Immediately after the Lord made the waters drinkable through his word, he issues a "statute and regulation," which again concern his instructions, the specifics of which are given in 15:26.

These instructions constitute a test. The Lord gives them instructions to follow in order to test them. We may recoil from the prospect of the Lord's testing the Israelites, and we may especially recoil from the prospect of

his testing us. But the test is not to see if we pass; the test is to refine our character so that we will walk more closely with him. That means even if we "fail" the test, even if we disobey him, he will use even our disobedience to bring us closer to him. If that is the intent of the test, thank God that he tests us! If we weren't tested, we'd wander from him.

The Israelites are commanded to do two things, which are stated in two different ways. First they are to "give earnest heed to the voice of the Lord" and "do what is right in his sight," and second they are to "give ear to his commandments" and "keep all his statutes." They are to hear the word of God and obey it. Notice how in each pairing hearing precedes doing. In order to obey someone, we must hear what he's saying. This gives us the opportunity to believe what he's saying. If we hear someone accurately and believe that what he's asking us to do is good, we'll do it. Hearing, then, leads to faith, and faith leads to obedience. This dynamic is summed up neatly in Romans 10:17: "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ."

So if we have a problem with obedience, we may have a hearing problem. The words translated "give earnest heed" represent an emphatic construction in Hebrew that uses the verb normally translated "hear" or "listen" twice.

Listening to the voice of the Lord - his word - is vital. This means one thing: We've got to be in God's word. There is no substitute for pulling up a chair, opening the scriptures and listening to the voice of the Lord.

In this sentence hearing and doing are the conditions the Lord sets forth. If the condition of hearing and doing is met, then he will "put none of the diseases on you which I have put on the Egyptians." The diseases that the Lord gave the Egyptians were part of the 10 plagues, which he brought about in order to reveal himself, even to Pharaoh and the Egyptians (7:5, 8:10, 9:14). On one level, the plagues can be seen as the Lord's effort to reach the Egyptians, to turn them to himself. If the Israelites trust the Lord - if they listen to his word and obey it - the Lord will not need to use such measures to reach his people. If we trust the Lord - if we listen to his word and obey it - the Lord won't need to use such severe mercy to bring us back to him. But all of us have hearing and obedience problems, so the Lord in his grace will discipline us, and we should not faint when we are reprov'd by him (Hebrews 12:5).

The Lord says the people should hear and obey him, "for I, the Lord, am your healer." The conjunction "for" introduces an explanation for what has preceded it. It could relate to the Lord's putting none of the diseases on them. But what would that have to do with healing? How can someone be healed if they don't have an illness? More likely, the Lord's reference to himself as a healer is related to his command to them to hear and obey him.

Why would we be reluctant to hear and obey the Lord? Because we don't believe he's our healer. We are afraid he is one who hurts, not one who heals. So when he asks us to do something, we don't trust him that it's for our good. So perhaps we close off our ears and don't listen to the One we don't trust. Or perhaps if we hear, we don't obey, because we're afraid that obedience will hurt.

But the word of God stands: "I, the Lord, am your healer." He has healed. He is healing. He will heal. These are facts. Note the possessive pronoun: The Lord is *your* healer. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, the Lord is not just a healer, he is *your* healer, whether you feel that you have received any healing or not. He has healed, he is healing, he will heal ... you!

So what do we do with this information? How do we respond to the truth that the Lord is our healer? Hear and obey! Listen to the word of God, for he's your healer. Trust what he says, for he's your healer. Do what he says, for he's your healer. And if you find that you've closed off your ears, that you haven't trusted him, that you haven't obeyed him, do you know what? He's still your healer. He'll heal your hearing problem. A literal translation of David's words in Psalm 40:6 reads: "My ears you have dug." Just as Jesus healed the deaf man (Mark 7:32-35), the Lord gives us ears to hear. And as we hear and obey our healer, life is sweet.

I have a friend who found a roll of money in the parking lot of a department store. Jim's first thought was, "Boy, that looks like a lot of money, maybe \$100." But he refused to unroll the money to see how much it was. He turned it into a clerk inside the store. It turned out to be \$660. As he was leaving the store, he saw a

car pull into the parking lot that was being driven by a man with a panicked look on his face. When the man got out of his car, Jim approached him. The interchange went like this:

"How are you doing?"

"Not too good. I just lost something."

"Was it money?"

"Yeah, lots of it."

"It's inside."

The man was stunned, so much so that he forgot to offer Jim any reward. Jim never heard from the man. But he says that seeing the man's reaction was worth well more than \$660. Hear the word: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Do it: Return the money. That's sweet. Hearing and obeying the word of God is the sweetest way to live.

The Lord not only turns bitter waters into sweet waters, he also has a few surprises waiting just around the bend.

Abundant provision (15:27)

Elim was just seven miles south of Marah. When the Israelites came to Marah and were bitterly disappointed, an oasis of 12 springs and 70 palm trees was waiting just seven miles ahead. We don't know the future, but we do know that God will provide.

What purpose could the author have in mentioning the specific number of springs and palm trees? These numbers have appeared before in the Pentateuch, and in Exodus. Twelve is the number of the people of God: 12 sons of Israel, 12 disciples of Jesus. Seven is the number of completeness, as seen in the seven days of creation. Seven multiplied by 10 intensifies the concept of completeness. In Genesis 10, when God started over with mankind after the flood, there were 70 nations. Genesis 46:8-27 lists the 12 sons of Jacob who came to Egypt, along with their families, giving the total number as 70. In Exodus 1:1-7, the sons are listed again, as is the number 70 in reference to their families. In Israel, God is starting over in his effort to reach the world. These numbers tell us that the deal is still on. His plan of redemption for all mankind, which will come through Israel, and ultimately through one descendant of Israel, Jesus Christ, marches forward.

There are 12 sons, and 12 tribes from those sons, and there were originally 70 descendants from those sons. There are 12 springs and 70 palm trees. The people are now much more than 70. God has been faithful. Despite the harsh treatment in Egypt, God has made them fruitful; the men number 600,000 (12:37). The 12 tribes are bubbling with life as if they were springs of water. The people are flourishing as if they were palm trees. Psalm 92:12: "The righteous man will flourish like the palm tree."

The springs and palm trees tell the Israelites that they will teem with life and flourish if they hear the word of God and obey it. Psalm 1:2-3: "But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in his law he meditates day and night. And he will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither, and in whatever he does, he prospers."

So, this oasis in the desert is just seven miles ahead. Can we trust the Lord for another seven miles? How about one more day? For up ahead, around the bend, are cool, gushing, refreshing springs of water, from which we get sips here but from which we will most assuredly drink most deeply and eternally when Jesus comes back for us. The Lord will provide, and he will provide abundantly.

Most significantly, he provides himself. He is the fountain of living waters (Jeremiah 2:13). The Holy Spirit satisfies our thirst and is in fact a river of living water in our innermost being (John 7:37-39).

When I was a young boy learning to fish, I came upon a beautiful little stream that seemingly had no fish in it. I didn't catch any of them, at any rate. But I was persistent in those days. I wouldn't give up on a stream until the sun went down. As I walked upstream, I came upon a pool that, to my surprise, was teeming with trout. They were bumping heads. I thought, "They'll never bite." I cast my line, and a trout dashed for my bait, and I reeled in a trout. I fetched my brothers, who were further downstream, and we fished to our hearts' content in that pool that day, reeling in fish after fish. The Lord will provide, and he will provide abundantly. Keep listening to his word; keep obeying him. Up around the bend springs of life are surging.

Hear and obey

Life can seem like a series of false hopes, letdowns and grumblings. Yet the Lord tells us to trust his word. Hear his word, and obey his word; for the Lord, our healer, turns bitterness into sweetness and fills our hearts to overflowing with living water.

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