

No Longer Slaves: the spring at Mara

The Israelites have made it out of Egypt, but they are a long way from the freedom God intends for them. With this study we return to our Exodus series, *No Longer Slaves!*, joining our wandering forefathers (1 Corinthians 10:1) on their road to the land of promise. They really are our forefathers, our kin: they struggled as we do; they were tested, as we are; they persevered, as we must.

As a way in, consider Paul's dictum in Galatians 5:1: "For freedom Christ has set us free! Stand firm, then, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery!"

1. What does "freedom" mean to you personally?
2. What is the "yoke of slavery" that tempts you to surrender?

So we join the Israelites at the far edge of the Red Sea. They have seen wonders, and realize that YHWH is a God who delivers from enemies. Read Exodus 15:1-3. There we find the story of YHWH enriched with new learning: YHWH, Man of War! YHWH is his name! Their faith has grown.

But just to be clear: faith is not monolithic. There are so many dimensions to God in his relationship with us and with all creation. We may be strong in faith - in trust and conviction - in relation to some of these, but not others. When the father of a troubled boy cries out to Jesus, "I do believe! Help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:23-24), he is saying that he believes in Jesus in some respects, but not (yet) in others. In the wake of God's defeat of Pharaoh, Israel has come to faith in YHWH, Man of War. But there are many more truths about YHWH that Israel must learn, and learn to trust, if they are to be truly free.

3. ("I do believe!") What aspects of your faith in God are strong in trust and conviction?
4. ("Help my unbelief!") Which are weaker? Be honest!

Read Exodus 15:22. There we see Moses leading the people into the desert, for "three days" - or more than a day, less than a week. Long enough for supplies of water to run low, and the need for a spring to grow pressing. Knowing YHWH to be great against Egyptian marauders isn't going to comfort them in the face of thirst. And so their faith is tested: will YHWH provide? No doubt as the days went on they appealed to Moses: "will we be okay? Will God provide water?" And Moses will have reassured them: "God will provide for you: trust him!"

Read Exodus 15:23. God has provided a spring! But the spring is called “Mara” (meaning “bitter”) for a reason: its waters are brackish and salty. God’s provision, when it comes, appears to be a cruel disappointment. Here is a deep test of faith: at stake is not just God’s ability to provide, but his willingness to provide what is good. Is he cruel and capricious? Is this YHWH, Man of Disappointment? Truly, the spring is well named: for bitterness is the first of many fruit to ripen in disappointment.

5. Where can you trace disappointment in your life – where something you thought was God’s good thing turned out to be (or at least, to seem) quite the opposite?
6. When you hit an unexpected dead end, how do you tend to respond?

Faced with a dead end, the Israelites must have been tempted to panic: to run elsewhere, hoping against hope for another spring over the next dune. But first they will appeal to Moses: “what are we supposed to drink?” (Exodus 15:24). This is a test for Moses too: will YHWH back his leadership? Imagine how he must have prayed at this point! “What am I not seeing, Lord? Did I get this all wrong?”

Read Exodus 15:25. God shows Moses – literally, *teaches* Moses – a tree! The tree is familiar enough (an oleander, probably), but Moses has to “learn” it for God’s purposes at Mara to be fulfilled. It turns out that Mara will be a place of God’s provision after all – if Moses acts in faith. So he casts the tree – perhaps, the leaves of white oleander – into the water, and the water becomes “sweet”. God heals the spring! Not only will Israel quench its thirst, but they will leave behind a spring to serve the needs of other travellers. Their passing, as the people of God, brings life. It might remind you of Psalm 84:5-7 (read these verses), where the passing of pilgrims on their way to Zion transforms a desert valley to a place of springs.

The lessons of faith – truths about God and his ways – are many in this passage. The Lord’s leading can be trusted! The Lord provides, but requires the actions of faith! The Lord redeems what is bitter, and turns disappointment to wonder!

7. Can you tell a story of disappointment transformed, and how faith was instrumental in “turning things around”?
8. Where is the “spring of Mara” in your own life? What might be the “tree” that God wants to “teach” you?

It’s in stories like this, in episodes of ordinary life with its struggles, dilemmas and challenges, that the “law” of God is declared and his covenant enacted. In

worship services and retreats we rehearse the convictions of faith, but they are worked out and proven true in the course of everyday life. Read Exodus 15:25-26, where the language of covenant is rich in the wake of this episode. There Israel learns that YHWH is Healer of those who walk in covenant with him. YHWH, Man of War: YHWH, Healer of Israel: another string to the bow of faith.

Finally, remember that there is a rhythm to the life of faith. Faith is tested and refined, and then – often enough – rewarded. Complex lessons are often followed by simple blessings. Read Exodus 15:27, where Israel leave the miraculous spring of Mara and come to a genuine, full-blown oasis. That’s Elim, with a spring for each of the 12 tribes and a date palm for each of 70 elders. A perfect place, and a sign of the land of promise ahead.

9. Ever camped at a place like “Elim”? Tell a story of a season of God’s blessing in your life.

Give time to consider where you are on your journey right now. Are you wandering in a desert with growing thirst? Are you facing down the disappointment of Mara? Wondering about trees? Are you camped at Elim? Pray for the Lord’s presence and provision, wherever you find yourself: for the pillar of cloud, lit by fire at night, never left Israel in its wandering. The Lord is near: seek him!