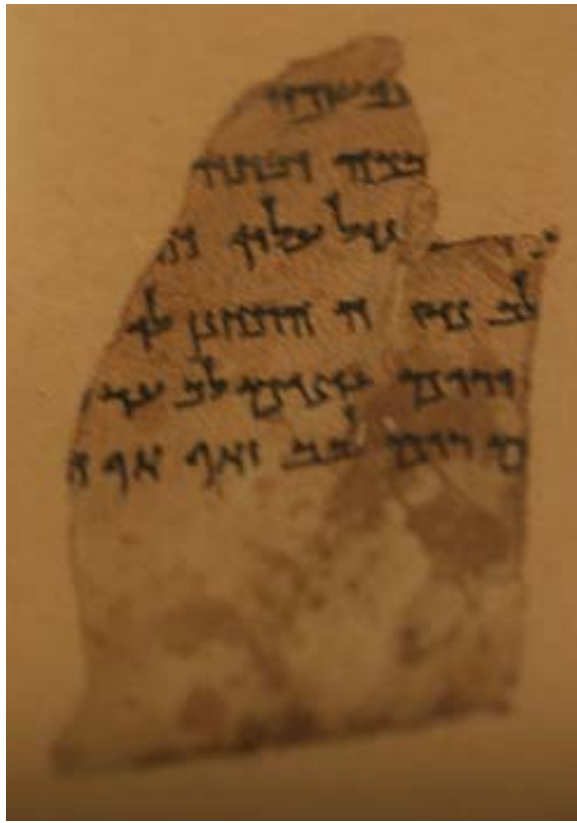


The Covenant Pulpit



EXODUS

Possessing the Promises

“DISAPPOINTMENT”
EXODUS 15

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When Martin Luther King was locked away in the Birmingham jail, he smuggled these words out to his dispirited followers:

“We must accept finite disappointment but never lose infinite hope.”

Surely Andy understood disappointment. His ability to withstand pain became the stuff of frontier legend. Raised by a widowed mother in a hillbilly cabin, this freckle-faced runt learned early how to fight for everything he ever got. A nervous condition that caused him to slobber uncontrollably made him the target of cruel jokes. But it also made him as tough as the hard, hickory trees in his South Carolina forests.

At age 13, this tenacious teen ran off to fight in the Revolutionary War. Shortly afterwards, he and his brother were captured. When he refused to shine the boots of a British officer, he was struck by a sword that left a vicious gash across his forehead. That blow would cause Andy a lifetime of migraine headaches.

During their imprisonment, the two brothers came down with small pox. Their mother walked 45 miles to the British camp and somehow got her boys released. A few days later, his brother Robert died from the pox. Andy slipped into delirium and was unconscious when his mother died of cholera. He barely had time to digest his mother's death when news came that his brother Hugh had been killed in battle. Within weeks he had lost his entire family. During those days of agonizing grief he formulated a credo that would serve him well in the rough-and-tumble years ahead: “One man with courage makes a majority.”

He rose from his bitter disappointments to attack life with a vengeance. When he wasn't fighting Indians, Andy was mixing it up in barroom brawls and deadly duels. It seemed that the hurt inside drove him to inflict pain on others.

Then he fell hopelessly in love with Rachel. For the first time in his life he was gloriously happy. But she was a divorcee, and he had big political dreams in an age when divorce was scandalous. After he married Rachel, they discovered that a terrible mistake had been made by the courts and she was still legally married to her first husband. For years afterwards, his beloved Rachel would be the brunt of salacious gossip. Andy fought thirteen duels defending her honor. People joked that his body carried so many bullets that when he walked “he shook like a bag of marbles.” A bullet lodged near his heart brought him a lifetime of excruciating pain, causing his body to shake uncontrollably from hacking coughs which left his handkerchiefs drenched with blood.

But he overcame his physical and emotional pains to become America's greatest military hero in the War of 1812. He would often say to those closest to him, “Never take counsel with your fears.” That credo was tested when he decided to run for President of the United States. The

stakes were great in a country teetering on the edge of civil war. In one of the dirtiest political campaigns in U.S. history, Rachel's name was dragged through the mud as his opponents viciously portrayed her as a loose woman unfit to be the first lady of America. During that brutal campaign Andy and Rachel endured further pain when their 16 year-old adopted son died of tuberculosis.

But, with the toughness that had earned him the nickname *Old Hickory*, Andrew Jackson won that election in 1828. But the joy of victory was short-lived. His dear Rachel, wounded by the smear campaign against her, suffered a fatal heart attack. A grieving Andy was sworn in at an inauguration that turned into a riot. A mob of his drunken frontier supporters trashed the White House. Servants were forced to drag bathtubs out to the front lawn and fill them with whiskey to entice the rabble out of the mansion. Newspapers across America gave Andy a new nickname: "King Mob".

He overcame the bitter disappointment of those first days to serve two terms. Through dogged determination he managed to steer America away from civil war. He was the only president ever to wipe out the Federal Deficit. He then skillfully navigated the country through its worst depression. During those tough times he often repeated, "The Bible is the rock on which both my life and the republic rests." When a reporter asked him the secret to his tenacity, he quipped, "You must pay the price of disappointment if you wish to secure the blessings of life."

He retired to Nashville to live out his pain-filled final years. Toward the end, his body was racked with hacking cough and his pillows stained with blood. His migraine headaches were unending and his body bloated. During sleepless nights he spoke incessantly of Rachel and heaven. He wrote in a final letter to friends: "Sirs, I am in the hands of a merciful God... the Bible is true...upon that sacred volume I rest my eternal salvation through the merits and blood of our blessed Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." He called his family and servants to his deathbed and spoke of the infinite hope that still endured from his greatest disappointment in life: "Heaven will be no heaven if I do not meet my wife there. I go to meet Rachael. Do not cry for me, dear children. Follow Jesus and I will see you all, both black and white, in heaven."

Disappointment humbles the haughty and softens the stubborn. Silently and relentlessly, it wins battles deep within the lonely soul. Its pain is God's scalpel to remove that which keeps us from great character. I have searched long and hard the pages of Scripture and the annals of history, and have yet to discover a single person that our Lord didn't use greatly without first hurting deeply.

Only God and you know how many disappointments stab at your body and soul. But the next time you feel that pain, take out a \$20 bill and look at the picture of Andrew Jackson. When you do, remember the

words of Martin Luther King: "We must expect finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope." Andy would say "amen" to those words of Dr. King. He would tell you that hope birthed out of disappointment grows into the hard resolve of *Old Hickory*.

Moses would also agree with those words. His road to the Promised Land was paved with disappointments. He must have felt sucker-punched at Marah. What do you do when you have danced in triumph on the banks of the Red Sea only to find yourself dying of thirst on the banks of the Marah three days later? If you are Andrew Jackson, how do you respond when you win the presidency, only to lose the love of your life two weeks later? I think that you have to cling to this sixth principle for those who are on an Exodus with Jesus:

Finite disappointments pave the road to infinite hope.

In the afterglow of the amazing miracle at the Red Sea, the Israelites are giddy with excitement. But after the celebration, reality sets in. Standing between them and their hope is the desert. And you can't get to the Promised Land without going through the desert.

The odds against them are overwhelming. There are around 3.6 million Jewish refugees. Giving each family enough space, their camp would be about 10½ miles square. If the Israelites and their livestock were placed in a line 50 abreast, the length of that line would stretch back 100 miles, taking nearly 50 hours to pass the same point. It would require 160 railroad boxcars of food, and 1,080 tank cars of water just to meet their daily needs in the most desolate wilderness on planet earth—a barren moonscape where temperatures soar to 120° Fahrenheit during the day and plunge below freezing at night.

God delights in putting us in impossible situations that force us to walk by faith, not sight. But faith is easier right after a big miracle. So they follow with blind faith that old man whose raised staff had parted the seas. Verse 23 is a snapshot of faith: "...and they went into the Desert of Shur. For three days they traveled in the desert without finding water." Though their tongues are swollen, they keep faith gained at the Red Sea.

Then a cry goes up, "Water ahead!" and the stampede is on. Imagine the disappointment when the first to arrive begin spitting the water out in disgust. Bad news always spreads fastest. Within minutes everyone knows the water is bitter and undrinkable. Verse 23 says that they give that desert lake a new name: *Marah*. The Hebrew word literally means "the place of bitterness." Every one of us has spent time at our own Marah. Some of us have revisited that place too many times. Others of us have stayed camped at Marah for years.

In verse 24 we read the words we will see often in Exodus: "So the people grumbled against Moses..." Dancing has turned to

disappointment. The root of disappointment is unrealized expectations. Wounds of disappointment don't heal easily. British playwright Thomas Hardy wrote, "The sudden disappointment of a hope leaves a scar which the ultimate fulfillment of that hope never entirely removes." Visit Marah enough times and faith can become a mass of hardened scars. Marah turns people into cynics and skeptics. After Marah you are afraid to hope again, believe again, love again, or risk failure again. In a song in his Broadway musical *Passion*, Stephen Sondheim speaks for a lot of people: "Ah, but if you have no expectations you will expect nothing and accept everything and you will never be disappointed."

But unless we can overcome that place called Marah we will fall victim to the words of opera legend Beverly Sills, a woman who faced repeated rejection in her life: "You may be disappointed if you fail, but doomed if you don't try." The Enemy of our Soul does his best work at Marah. If he can cause us to be afraid of the pain of disappointment so that we abandon risky faith, we are doomed to fall by the wayside in the desert. To overcome Marah we need to grasp these four transforming truths:

1. The Lord *positions* his people at the place of disappointment

One of Satan's lies is that God is with us in the good times, but has abandoned us in the bad times. When Job was suffering, and his wife told him to curse God, he replied, "Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" (Job 2:8) He is saying that trouble is comes from God. For people like Job, Moses, and Andrew Jackson, trouble is one of God's precious gifts. Even when we find ourselves at Marah because of our own sin or stupidity, God is there to bring good out of the bad.

Don't lose sight of those first key words in verse twenty-two: "Then Moses *led* Israel..." God's people didn't just stumble onto Marah. They were led there by God's design. Three days earlier they were led to the Red Sea. When we talk about the dancing that took place *after* the Red Sea crossing, we need to remember the despair before the miracle took place. Moses had led them into a trap. Before them was the sea. Behind them was the Pharaoh's army cutting off all escape. Exodus 14:10 says of the Israelites, "They were terrified and cried out to the LORD..." There is a reoccurring cycle in the Exodus. It goes something like this: a *problem* creates *panic*, resulting in *prayer*, bringing in *provision* that leads to *praise*. That's what happened at the Red Sea.

Only three days later, it happens again at Marah. Notice that God's people don't immediately pray. Complaining always seems to be their first option. That's why he has to put them through the same five-step cycle again and again: *problem... panic... prayer... provision...praise*. Remember, these Israelites are recent converts. It was only after they crossed the Red Sea that Exodus 14:31 says, "...the people feared the Lord and put their trust in him..." This is their conversion experience. When they get to Marah, they are 3 day-old baby believers and incoming

freshman in the Desert School of Faith. Moses has already earned his PhD degree in 40 years on the desert. He's now beginning post-doctoral work in faith, but the rest of them are just newbies.

God could have taken them to the Promised Land further south, below the Nile Delta, on a journey up through what is now the Gaza Strip. It would have been a 3-day "walk in the park" along the Mediterranean Sea. But they were still a slave rabble untrained in the arts of war. They would be slaughtered by the six million heavily-armed and fortified Canaanites. These slaves needed to become warriors. This disorganized mob needed to be reformed into a unified nation. Most of all they needed to become infused with God's presence and power. That's why they had to go through the desert route, stopping at places like Marah to recycle their faith: *problem...panic...prayer...provision...praise*.

He puts us through the same cycle. I wish that we didn't have to come to Marah before we are desperate enough to enjoy the fellowship of prayer. I wish we didn't have to be bailed out of a hopeless situation before we are motivated to praise him, even to the point of dancing. But, until that happens, we will go through the cycle. When we get to the point where we don't need *problems* and *panic* to drive us to *prayer*, and we don't need *provision* to motivate our *praise* then we will truly enter the Promised Land. Until then, God will position our lives so that we make frequent stops at places called Marah. .

2. The Lord *provides* for his people at the place of disappointment.

Baby believers grumble to themselves and complain to others when life throws them a curve ball at Marah. Their spiritual leader could have gotten upset when, according to verse 24, "...the people grumbled *against* Moses..." Someone asked me the other day, "Pastor, do you ever feel like you are being eaten by sharks?" I replied, "No, I feel like I've been gummed to death by minnows." I've worn myself out trying to placate and please unhappy parishioners. Maybe that's why 8,000 clergy drop out of the pastorate in the U.S. every year. That's why I stand in awe of Moses' spiritual maturity. How did he go the distance for over 40 years with his unhappy congregation? The secret is in verse twenty-five: "Then Moses cried out to the Lord..." Instead of placating the parishioners, he went immediately to the Lord. The best ministry any pastor or elder can ever perform is to pray for his church. The best thing parents can do is to pray for their children. The most effective thing any politician can do is to pray for his country. God alone provides the answers at places like Marah.

Now look at the amazing answer God gives Moses in verse twenty-five: "...and the Lord showed him a piece of wood. He threw it into the water, and it became sweet." On the surface it is the strangest of miracles. But look closer, and you find the heart of the gospel. Literally, the Hebrew language says that it was a tree that Moses threw into the

water. Maybe it was a standing tree that he ripped down. Or it was a dead tree, old and rugged on the ground. In that tree I see the cross of Jesus. Moses said to God, "My people are thirsty." And God replied, "Show them the Cross." It's the Cross that turns the bitterness of sin and failure into the sweetness of grace and hope. Before he died, Andrew Jackson wrote to friends that it was his trust in the blood shed on the cross that purchased he heaven where both Jesus and Rachel waited. The cross is always the answer. That's why St. Paul said to his parishioners, "But we preach Christ crucified..." (2 Corinthians 1:23). He added, "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Christ and him crucified." In Christ's work on the Cross the greatest need of our life was met: salvation from hell and eternal life with God. But every lesser need is provided for also at the Cross. Whenever you are at Marah, and life is filled with bitterness and pain, look to the Cross and remember the words of St. Paul in Romans 8:32, "He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things." You don't have to fear risky faith. Let God lead you into the desert, even if it is scary. There's a tree to make sweet the waters of bitterness, and remind you that God will provide everything you need for the journey.

3. The Lord *protects* his people at the place of disappointment.

After the tree sweetens the bitter water, God gives a wonderful promise in verses 25&25:

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

In verse 25 we see that he "tested" his people at Marah. How did he test them? I believe that, in those bitter waters, he was replaying the first plague that took place in Egypt. When Pharaoh hardened his heart against God's command, the Nile River turned to blood. All life in the Nile died. Its water was undrinkable. Because the Nile was the source of all life in that desert nation, God was pronouncing a death sentence on Egypt. It is a curse as old as the Garden of Eden: "In the day you eat of the (forbidden) fruit, you will surely die." (Genesis 2:17) Paul repeated it in Romans 6:23: "For the wages of sin is death." Some of us are at Marah because of our sins. Sin brings death and disease, even for believers. But again, there is that tree that sweetens the bitter waters. Jesus hung on that tree. He took upon himself the curse: sin, poverty, disease, death. He endured God's wrath in our place. It's in the shadow of that tree that we take our refuge, as surely as those ancient Israelites hid under the blood of the sacrificial lamb that had smeared on their doorpost the night the Death Angel passed over Egypt.

God protects us in Christ. Maybe you are at Marah today because of sin and stupidity. And now you are drinking the bitter water of sin's consequences. Are you thirsting for righteousness? Look to the Cross? Run to the Resurrected Savior, throw yourself into his arms and put your future in his nail-scarred hands. In verse 26, God promises, "For I am the God who heals you." I Peter 2:24 responds, "For by his stripes we are healed." Christ will not only heal you, he will protect you all the way to the Promised Land. He loves you too much to let you live like the Egyptians. If you don't pay attention to his commands and decrees, he will allow you to suffer the diseases of the Egyptians. But if you will die to your own desires and lusts, and follow him, you will not be making nearly as many frequent stops at Marah.

4. The Lord has a *purpose* beyond the place of disappointment.

There is life after disappointment. Verse 27 says, "Then they came to Elim where there were twelve springs and seventy palm trees, and they camped there near the waters." God doesn't want us to drive down our tent pegs at Marah. Too many people camp at the place of their bitterness for years, fixated on past disappointments.

Have you ever been amazed that a massive elephant can be tethered to a small stake that he easily rip out of the ground? Trainers tether them to the stake when they are babies. The baby elephant grunts and pulls, trying to break loose. After several weeks, he gives up. Later he is several tons of massive power, still shackled to a stake designed for a baby elephant, a prisoner of past failures at shaking loose. Though he is an adult, he still thinks like a baby. Some us are still shackled to the stake of past disappointments, still prisoners of how things used to be.

It's time to move on from Marah while we still have a chance. The best that life has to offer is still out there ahead of us. If we never leave Marah, we'll never get to Elim. And, if we stay camped at easy places like Elim, we will never get on to the Promised Land. There are still more deserts and oasis' ahead in this faith adventure called the Exodus. Jesus knows what we are facing. He's been to Marah. It wasn't easy to drink the bitter cup of his own suffering. No one ever prayed harder than he did in Gethsemane. But he moved on to the Cross. And three days later, he moved on to the Resurrection. Andy Jackson, God may take your Rachel, but Jesus and she wait out there for you in heaven. And so we take the faith risk, knowing that finite disappointments pave the road to infinite hope. We move forward remembering God's provision for today: at every Mara there is a Cross; and God's promise for tomorrow: beyond every Marah there is an Elim.