

Emblems From the Wilderness

by A.B. Simpson

God leads us through trials and difficulties to train us for the future, to show us what we are, and to humble us so that we may trust in Him.

Scripture: Exodus 13:17

Topics: "God's Provision", "Trials and Growth"

Description

A.B. Simpson emphasizes the spiritual journey of the Israelites through the wilderness as a metaphor for the trials faced in the Christian life. He explains that God often leads His people through difficult paths not for destruction, but for growth, teaching them reliance on Him and revealing their true nature. The sermon highlights God's provision, such as the sweetening of bitter waters and the covenant of healing, illustrating that through trials, believers can experience God's sufficiency and grace. Simpson encourages the congregation to embrace their wilderness experiences, knowing that they lead to deeper faith and eventual blessings, symbolized by the wells and palms of Elim.

Transcript

"And it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God led them not through the way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near; for God said, Lest peradventure the people repent when they see war, and they return to Egypt; but God led the people about, through the way of the wilderness of the Red Sea. And the children of Israel went up harnessed out of the land of Egypt." Ex. 13: 17-18.

"So Moses brought Israel from the Red Sea, and they went out into the wilderness of Shur; and they went three days in the wilderness and found no water. And when they came to Marah, they could not drink of the waters of Marah; for they were bitter: therefore the name of it was called Marah. And the people murmured against Moses, saying, What shall we drink? And he cried unto the Lord; and the Lord showed him a tree, which when he had cast into the waters, the waters were made sweet: there he made for them a statute and an ordinance, and there he proved them, and said, If thou wilt diligently hearken to the voice of the Lord thy God, and wilt do that which is right in his sight, and wilt give ear to his commandments, and keep all his statutes, I will put none of these diseases upon thee, which I have brought upon the Egyptians: for I am the Lord that healeth thee. And they came to Elim, where were twelve wells of water, and threescore and ten palm trees: and they encamped there by the waters." Ex. 15: 22-27.

SECTION I -- The Pathway of Trial.

We have here a picture of the pathway through which God led his ancient people immediately after their redemption. It is symbolical, of course, of the pathway of our own pilgrimage, even as their redemption was the emblem of our redemption from the bondage of sin and misery.

We are told here that the Lord led them not by the way of the Philistines, which was near, "but about by the way of the wilderness of the Red sea." So we infer that God does not always lead us by the nearest way, and certainly not by the easiest way, as he calls us to Him. And this is the type of the trials of our Christian life. A reason is given: "Lest they repent when they see war, and they return to Egypt." God could not trust his people to go the easy way, and so he had to lead them the longer way, and discipline them.

There are many other things about the way He led them, which apply to us. The first was that He might have them apart with Himself, and train them for the future. And so God has to take all His children apart to teach them. Our dear Lord had to go apart into the wilderness forty days before He began his ministry. Let us not wonder if we share His life. Moses had to go forty years apart before God could use him. And Paul went three years into Arabia, where he was separated to God, and then came forth to do his Master's work. When the gardeners of this city are preparing their beds, they go out and find black loamy earth, and then they can raise almost anything in the ground that comes from the virgin soil. And so when God wants to raise spiritual harvest He says, "I will allure her and bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfortably unto her, and I will give her vineyards from thence," that is from the soil that comes from her wilderness experience. So, beloved, if you had an easy path you would become a coward, and run away every time you saw a Philistine. The people that have no trials and discipline are just like this, they are soft and cowardly. And the one that God wants to make strong to undergo the journey to Canaan, he has to make hardy by discipline and training. He leads you by the hard way that you may be harnessed, may be trained as a soldier to fight the battles of your life, educated for your work by the very things you are going through now.

Another reason he led them through the wilderness, was to show them what worthless creatures they were. In Deuteronomy he tells them very fully, in the eighth chapter, "Thou shalt remember all the way which the Lord thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness, to humble thee, and to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldest keep His commandments, or no." That was another reason why He led them through the wilderness. If they had gone the short way, they would have gone in with floating banners, and the idea that they were a wonderful people; but when God led them this way, they soon discovered themselves. They would have found it out later, when they came into Canaan, and would have been defeated by it. But God had to show it by the way of trial, before they could come to their future inheritance.

And so God leads us through the wilderness to show us what we are. There are people that can go through a hard march all right, but when they have to go through the hard little things, they break down. They will bear severe pain; or undertake some great service; or seem marvelously useful in some public enterprise that gives them an eclat of success and applause. Let them go through a desert march, or where Sherman's army had to cross the continent, or Napoleon's army had to go through the Russian campaign, or Woolsey's army in Egypt, and they go through all right. But the least little thing defeats them. They become sour and distrustful and ungrateful; and if they do not go back to Egypt, they do not deserve any credit for it, for they would go if they could; and they blame Him bitterly because he brought them out.

Beloved, it is a wonderful thing to find out that God is not trying to show you how much you are, but how little good you can do by yourself. It was the most extraordinary discovery I ever made in my Christian life, when at last I fairly found out that what the Lord wanted of me was to have a tremendous lot of failures, until I broke completely down and gave up, and then had Him work it out for me. I do not mean that I gave up, but I gave up trying it myself. I had been looking to Him occasionally, but he wanted me just to depend upon Him all the time, and to look to Him for everything. So He leads you through the wilderness; He wants to humble you, to prove you, and see if you will keep the commandments, or not.

Another reason is to show how little this world is worth: How little it has that can supply an immortal soul, and how God can be the supply of the soul. He took them out into a barren wilderness where they had not anything to support the three millions of people for a day; and for all those years he supported them on the sands of Arabia, day by day spreading their table, and making the water flow from the rocks, and meeting their complaints and recriminations with blessing. They did not get their support from the desert. There was not any water there to supply them, nor any bread to sustain them. Modern researches have endeavored to explain the manner and method by natural laws. There are little plants in the desert; a few grains can be picked up under the tamarisk trees, a sort of balsam that drops from the branches sometimes; but it is not enough to support a single life for a day. And it is ridiculous to try to explain the Bible this way. The boundless and permanent supply shows that it was from the hand of God. This was intended to show that God can supply all our needs Himself. We read in Deuteronomy, "He humbled thee, and suffered thee to hunger, and fed thee with manna, which thou knewest not," that is, which is not a product of earth. He did this to show them that God was enough for their supply. This shows us that God leads us through the narrow places so that when everything fails us, He can do it for us. God leads some people through that kind of suffering, so they can look the devil in the face and say, "God led me through this place, and nothing ever can be harder than the way he led me." He put Paul up as a sort of spectacle or gazing-stock. He said, "We have had all sorts of suffering; we have been sunk in the sea, and stoned until we have not a bit of vitality left." And then he says, "Though sorrowful we are always rejoicing." God wanted to show that His grace was sufficient. When the desert affords no food, and all is a waste of desolation, then God will make it blossom as the rose.

Now, beloved, if God leads you through trying places, don't say "it is because God wants to destroy me." It is that he may show you that he is able for that, and he can create a supply that would have never been known, if you had not had that need. So turn your dark cloud into a background for a rainbow, and just begin to praise Him, and rise through it to a deeper knowledge of His character. Will you take these lessons to yourself? It is the very way by which He is to educate you. How little you can depend upon your resolutions, and plans; but He is enough for your trials and difficulties, and even for the weakness and worthlessness of your poor unreliable nature.

Now, let us look briefly at their trials, and then at the wonderful way in which God met them. The first was, no water. The second was, bitter water. And the third, threatening sickness. We are not told they had sickness, but the healing implies it. God leads them into the wilderness of Shur, and they seem to be threatened with a famine. Then they come to a fountain in the oasis; they go to drink, but turn from it in disgust, for it is foul and bitter. And then they turn in disappointment and anger upon Moses, and upon God, and reproach them for having brought them on their journey. It is just like positions that come to us; we reach places where we seem to be shut in on every side. Perhaps some of you are there now. God wants to teach you that the old way is not to be the way any longer. And you must look to Him and not to the springs of earth, henceforth.

And then they came to water, and they said, "We have it at last," and lo! it was bitter. Do you not know what that is? Do you not know what it is after you have turned to some old friend, and leaned on some arm, to find, suddenly, that it becomes different from what it used to be? Your old friend does not understand you. And those things in which you used to joy have no pleasure now. Perhaps the thing you looked to becomes the opposite of what you sought. Perhaps the very thing that comes to you as a deliverer, becomes the saddest trial of your life. God has to let it be so. Our first resource is to go to them. Instead of looking up, we have hunted in the desert to find springs, and found many, and God had to turn them into gall, and show us that the only real help could come from Him. And then there came sickness, or threatened sickness. And so it has come to us. O how God feels for poor suffering men and women, especially those that carry heavy burdens under the strain of infirmity. How -- as I have gone among the humble ones that toil for bread, as I look back upon what a pastor finds in the lives of those he lives among -- how I have felt Christ must weep for the tired women that crowd our cities, that have the responsibilities of their children, and sometimes their support, and yet live such weary, suffering lives through physical disease. O how I have thanked God when I have seen His help coming to these, and found that it can lift their burdens off their bodies as well as their souls. There is many a poor mother working all the day, and half the night, and carrying in her body some hidden disease. And it was upon such as these that Christ looked with compassion, because they were like sheep without a shepherd, and He healed them, and said to them in words that are not exhausted yet, "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

SECTION II -- The Branch of Healing.

Let us now see the provisions of His grace for them. First, we have the sweetening of the bitter water. He lets them find its bitterness, and then He turns it into sweetness. "And the people murmured against Moses, saying, what shall we drink?" And he cried unto the Lord, and the Lord showed him a tree, which, when he had cast into the waters, the waters were made sweet. The bitter waters are not taken away, but they are neutralized and turned into a source of nourishment. You know what this means, dear friends; you know the difference between the sweet water that was always sweet and the bittersweet, more wholesome, and more delightful to the taste of the mature Christian heart. That is what God does; He lets the bitter come, and when we have eaten the little book which was bitter in the mouth, in our inner being it is sweeter than honey. There are chastenings that seem hard and bitter, but afterwards they bear the peaceable fruits of righteousness. Do you not know what it means to yield yourself to God, so it seems a real death to put your dearest on the altar, and raise the hand to strike, and when it is done, O the blessedness of knowing that you pleased God; the ineffable sweetness of His words, "Now, I know that thou lovest me, because thou hast not withheld thine only child." He seems to say, "I know what you feel; I understand you as no one else, and you understand me as you never could have done." O the delight of being with Him in the dark places -- alone with Him: and having His communications of love and grace, and saying, "Thou hast known my soul in adversity." And then, at last, to find the very things you thought the gates of death become the gates of heaven. The very thing you thought would break your heart turns into songs of joy, and pathways open up that never could have come but for this obedience, this sacrifice of yourself to God's will.

How does this sweetness come? It comes by casting the branch of healing into the waters. And this branch is always at hand. God does not have to create it. It was growing by the spring. It is always growing near the trial, and you can always find the branch that will turn the sorrow into joy. How, sometimes, He has shown us a verse that we never saw before, and lo! our trial was turned into sweetness, and we arose

in victory and praise. How often when you have felt as you must sink you have found a blessed promise, and have cried out, "Thanks be unto God who giveth us the victory?" Sometimes, when struggling with your wicked heart, He has given you a vision of His victory and with His coming the battle has ceased, and like the disciples you were at the land whither you went. We have all got verses marked in our Bibles that bring back whole chapters of life's history, and which you would not exchange for all the world.

You can go to London, and read there on the towers, written by the fingers of martyrs and prisoners who have languished in the Tower, such promises. You can go to Rome and see them in the ancient catacombs, promises which enabled them to declare that the insults and torments of their persecutors were robbed of their sting, just because the Lord Jesus Christ had made His Word real, and had caused them to triumph over suffering.

Dear friends, have you learned to use the branch that grows beside your door, that turns your tears to joy?

SECTION III -- The Covenant of Healing.

And we have not only this branch of healing, but the covenant of healing. "There He made for them a statute and an ordinance, and there He proved them, and said, If thou wilt diligently hearken to the voice of the Lord thy God, and wilt do that which is right in His sight, and wilt give ear to His commandments, and keep all His statutes, I will put none of those diseases upon thee, which I have brought upon the Egyptians; for I am the Lord that healeth thee." So not only did He provide for the trials of the wilderness, but for the physical infirmities of life.

Here we see first, that this Divine healing is to be from Him alone. "I will do it." It is to be a continuous thing. It is in the present tense. It is "I, the Lord thy God am healing." Day by day, He declares "I will be the strength of your bodies."

Again: it is to be by obedience. "If thou wilt diligently walk in my statutes." It is necessary that we shall both hear and obey. And a great many of our sicknesses come because we are well-meaning, but we do not understand God. We go into the forbidden path without meaning to, and our diseases have come again. So he bids us listen as well as do.

Again: there is to be a distinction between you and the world. The Lord wants to put a line between the world and the Egyptians: "I will put none of these diseases upon thee, which I have brought upon the Egyptians."

We see further, that this was a covenant and an ordinance for them. So this is just as much an appointment of God as redemption. And if you do not accept it, you are going to rob your life of one of its sweetest supports. We do not plead for any favorite idea, but we stand on God's ancient covenant, and God forbid that we should turn it aside. I do not see how any candid man can. The only way that any one can try to explain this is by saying that this passage referred to the plagues of the Egyptians. But that would be ridiculous, because they had not feared any of the plagues of Egypt; they had not been subject to them. They had been kept from them, and now it would seem absurd for them to need this promise. Forty years later, God renewed the same promise and covenant again, in stronger words, "I will put none of the evil diseases of Egypt upon thee, but will lay them upon all them that hate thee." And we know that he did not put the plagues of Egypt on their enemies then.

And then you notice just another word in this ancient ordinance of healing. "There he proved them." It seems that this was to be a kind of test in our Christian lives, whether we would trust God, or go to man. It seems sometimes as though God wants to show us whether we have a real trust in him, or are making believe, because the things we trusted for are a long way off. He proved them to see how far they made God real. I have found, and I think many of you have found, that when sickness and suffering come, and you have to find whether you have a living God, or not, it searches your soul; and when you have got hold of Him, it makes God intensely practical thereafter in your life.

We do not want anybody to think that this principle of God's healing should be crowded upon any soul, or that you are to get into any bondage of conscience; God wants you to be fully persuaded in your own mind. But if you will take this ancient Scripture, and trace your Bible through, you will find one uniform teaching -- that God met his people with all-sufficiency for all their trials; and that He undertook to be for their bodies what He was for their souls -- Jehovah Rophi, the God that changeth not.

Dear friends, do take this into your lives; you that are struggling under infirmity and debility; how much you need this Christ to breathe into you His strength every moment. No words can tell how near it brings the Savior to your life, to feel that every breath you draw is very part of His vital being. How sanctifying it is; how it makes you walk with Him in constant obedience; and how it seems to give you double strength. The strength that we get from Christ seems to go so much longer and farther. I wish I could make you feel as He makes me feel, in a busy life that grows busier every day. This supernatural strength is delightful. It almost seems as though one could not stop to sleep. It is not human, it is His; and every breath seems to accomplish more than mere earthly power. The things we do in this Divine physical strength go farther, they reach the hearts of men; and God seems to set them going through eternity. This is "a statute," a Divine law, and you cannot experiment with it. You must take it with the certainty that it is just as solid as the Rock of Ages. And if you take it, it will keep you until your life work is done. It will not keep you forever. There will come a time when you can say "I have finished my work." But until it comes, there is strength for you, according to all the measures of your needs.

SECTION IV -- The Wells and Palms of Elim.

There is yet one more picture here, the wells and palms of Elim. They come just after the waters of Marah. "And they came to Elim where were twelve wells of water, and threescore and ten palm trees; and they encamped there by the waters." This is a sweet break in the monotony of the picture; an oasis in the waste of desolation. It seems to rise before us with the soft verdure of loveliness and rest; and as we read the passage it is like a very Eden of coolness and repose; the very name Elim speaks of rest and freshness. It is the type of the times of refreshing that God sends us after weary seasons of suffering trial. "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning."

The wells tell us of supplies of water, and the palms of freshness in the midst of barrenness. There were twelve wells, and seventy palm trees. I love to think of the twelve wells as standing one for every month; teaching that God has some new revelation of Himself, some new supply of grace for every changing season of life. And then the seventy palms tell us of a blessing for every year. Seventy years seem to be the average of human existence, and so there are seventy palms and twelve wells -- a well for every month, a tree for every year. They tell us that all our life long we may be fruitful, that there is fruit to be borne in youth, and also in old age. It does not mean that everybody ought to live for seventy years; but as that is God's measure of life, so God has as many palms as He has years. He has something for us to do at the beginning, and something for the end. Beloved, let us come to drink of these wells. Shall we call the

first the heart of the blessed Jesus himself? Surely, that is where we want to begin. And shall we call the second the blessed Comforter, the Holy Ghost, ever running over with joy and living water? Shall we find the third in the Father's everlasting and infinite love? Shall we find the fourth in this blessed Word of God with its endless supplies for every kind of need? Shall we say the next is the well of salvation, with water enough not only for our salvation, but for all the world's! Shall we call the next the well of grace, where we can come with our buckets every morning and fill them there? Then we have the well of holiness; the well of healing; the well of joy, bubbling over, and ceaseless in its flow; the well of prayer where we can continually come, and not find it too deep, or say like the woman of Samaria, "We have nothing with which to draw;" side by side with this stands the well of faith; and, perhaps, best of all is that well which, like one of the geyser springs, is continually rising even above the level of the ground, and sending forth new fountains on every side, we shall call it the well of praise. And so God bids us come and drink at all the wells. As the garden of God has its twelve manner of fruits, so we have these twelve fountains of blessing. We need never wonder at the freshness of His supplies of grace.

Some, again, apply this to the twelve tribes; it is blessed to think that there was a well for each one.

The seventy palms tell us of an infinite variety of fruits. The very fact that the palm tree grows in the desert, shows that the Christian can grow anywhere. The palm wants the desert sun. It will not grow in the rich black soil. It wants the desert because it grows up and it grows down; it strikes its roots below the sand heap; and it sends its succulent leaves up, and if there is a breath of moisture, the palm tree can suck it in. And so God says that we are to be like palm trees in this, that we can grow in the hardest soil, and find what we need in Him. If you have Christ in your heart you can grow anywhere. You can be a happy Christian in society and at home. You can be happy in uncongenial society, in the workshop, in the boarding-house, or wherever you are. It is not true that we have got to be ruined because our surroundings are evil. If you have the roots, and the right kind of leaves, you can make the desert a garden; and the people will encamp around you.

The palm tree has an infinite variety of fruit. They say they can make almost anything out of it. Out of the roots you get sago and arrowroot, and many of the most delicious and valuable articles of commerce. The very fibers they weave into many useful objects. The sap yields delicious juices. Then we have the fruit, the date, cocoanut, and many others. The palm produces about a hundred staple articles of commerce. And so if you are a palm tree, you will be good for everything; not only tall, stately, and nice to look at, but you will have a shade for the people around you, and you will have practical and substantial utility about your life. And, moreover, like this ancient tree of Elim, you shall keep growing and multiplying year after year, until in youth and old age you shall have fulfilled all the ministry of a consistent and beautiful life, and it shall not have been one, but seventy, palms.

But if we have the palm trees, we must have the wells; and if we have the palm trees and the wells, we must go by the way of Marah.; we must start by the Red sea and follow the pillar of cloud and fire; and we must not be afraid of the wilderness. O shall we not follow on, hearkening to His word till we shall come to the waters of Elim and encamp there and sweetly sing:

"I've found a joy in sorrow,

A secret balm for pain,

A beautiful tomorrow

Of sunshine after rain.
I've found a branch of healing
Near every bitter spring;
A whispered promise stealing
O'er every broken spring;
An Elfin within its sunshine,
Its fountains and its shade;
A handful of sweet manna
When buds of promise fade."

Dear friends, God help you to turn into life this desert region. It is so real, I am sure it is real to you. And I dare tell you in His name this morning to follow Him. You shall have the wilderness, and the waters of Marah; but there is here a branch that will make it sweet; and O such blessed resting places by the way; and bye-and-bye, not Elim's palms merely, but the tree of life that is in the midst of the garden, and the water clear as crystal, and all the beauties of the paradise of God.

And bye-and-bye there shall be the river clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb, the tree of life with its twelve manner of fruits that yielded its fruit every month, and the tabernacle of God with men, where the tents never will be folded, the encampment broken up, or the lonely desert ever return again. Happy day! All hail! Amen.

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