

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, October 13, 1991, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

EXODUS 15:22-27

ENCOURAGING WORDS FROM GOD'S WORD

(6) HOW TO DEAL WITH DISAPPOINTMENT

In this series of messages, we've been looking at the "Deadly D's" -- we looked at delay, doubt, defeat, discouragement, and difficulty and today we're going to look at disappointment.

Disappointment, as we all know, is a common experience of life. There are many things in life that disappoint us. Events disappoint us. You buy tickets to a decisive game, and your favorite team gets beaten decisively, and you're disappointed. Things also have a tendency to disappoint us. Did you ever receive a Christmas gift, beautifully wrapped, and you open it up, and it's -- well, what is it?! Have you ever bought anything off a cereal box? Let me just tell you in advance -- don't! Events and things disappoint us. But by far the greatest disappointment of all are people -- people who let you down, people who are unreliable, ungrateful and unappreciative, who tell you one thing and do another, who hurt you, either intentionally or unintentionally.

But, in order to make it in life, you've got to learn to deal with people. And one of the secrets of success is learning how to deal with people who disappoint you.

Now, if anyone was a pro at dealing with people it was Moses. Moses knew how to deal with disappointment. He was the most patient man you could ever meet. No man put up with more complaining. In fact, the favorite pastime of the Jews at this point in their life was complaining. That was one of the reasons it took them 140 years to get from Egypt to the Promised Land. They kept complaining, so God would say, "OK, you get another test." They were quick to criticize their leader, and to challenge his decisions, and even his motives. At one point they said, "Moses, you just brought us out here into the desert to die!" And Moses must have thought, "Is this all the thanks I get?"

Now the incident we're going to look at today involves a water problem. The Israelites had many water problems. First, they had too much water at the Red Sea! "How are we going to get across?" The next water problem was that they didn't have any water, and they were looking for water. And then the third problem here was that they came to Marah where they found bitter water, and they weren't able to drink it.

Look at verses 22 and 23: "Then Moses led Israel from the Red Sea and they went into the desert of Shur. For three days, they traveled in the desert without finding water. When they came to Marah they could not drink its water because it was bitter. (That is why the place is called Marah.)" This Hebrew word "Marah" is the word from which we get the lady's name, "Mary." "Narah" means "bitter," but that is not a judgment on any of you ladies who are called Mary! That just happens to be what the word means in Hebrew.

And it was a difficult situation there at Marah. But from this incident in Moses' life we learn three lessons about disappointment:

1. The greatest successes in life are often followed by FAILURE. You notice here that only three days earlier they experienced victory at the Red Sea. They were flying high. They were on a spiritual mountain top. In this first part of this 15th chapter of Exodus they are singing a song of praise -- "God has delivered us; what a great day; we're invincible!" And three days later they're grumbling. Each new day brings its own problems, and the fact is that after every mountain top there is always a valley -- always.

Later when the Israelites entered the land of Canaan, they proceeded to capture and destroy the largest city of the land, Jericho. It was a tremendous victory and they defeated the biggest enemy in the country. The very next week they went up against Ai, which was nothing more than a rinky-dink village; and they were defeated. They got overconfident.

Now that's a fact of life, folks. It's the Ai's of life that get us down. In the big crises of life, we know Whom to depend on -- "God, I can't do this; I need Your help. Please help me!" But in the little problems of life, the daily irritations, we get presumptuous, and we think, "I can handle this one myself!" And so often we fall flat on our face. So, have you just had a big success in your life? Watch out! You're being set up! The greatest successes in life are often followed by failure.

Now, why did God lead them to Marah where the water was bitter? Look at verse 25: "There the Lord made a decree and a law for them, and there He tested them." Circle that word "tested." This is a test. God led them to Marah where they suffered bitter disappointment, in order to test their reaction -- "Do you really trust Me?" Notice that it doesn't say that about the Red Sea. It doesn't say that God tested them there. They didn't have any faith; God just opened the water on the basis of Moses' faith. God's character was revealed at the Red Sea; man's character was revealed at Marah. God's character, His faithfulness, is revealed in the big events of life; our character is revealed in the daily irritations, in the tight spots.

Now, what does disappointment say about you? How do you handle it? Look at Israel's response in verse 24: "So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, 'What are we to drink?'" It was a typical response -- griping against their leader. And that brings us to the second point we need to remember about disappointment —

2. The greatest services in life are often followed by FORGETFULNESS. Israel had such a short memory! I mean, it was just three days after the Red Sea deliverance; They had just witnessed an incredible miracle; and now, at the first sign of trouble, they're already doubting and criticizing and giving up. Poor Moses! One minute he's a hero; the next minute he's a zero! One minute he's the star; the next minute he's the scapegoat! Yet he never gave up. People forget things quickly. It's part of our sin nature. Children forget parents; bosses forget employees; spouses take each other for granted. Northwestern University did a study recently and found that the average homemaker, in her lifetime, will serve 35,000 meals and make 40,000 beds! Tell me — is there anybody in your life that you're taking for granted? Husbands, do you encourage your wives? Wives, do you encourage your husbands? Parents, do you encourage your children, and

build up their self-esteem? Whom are you taking for granted -- a spouse, an employee, a boss, a friend, a Sunday School teacher, a nursery worker?

Now, what do you do when you're disappointed in somebody? What do you do when someone lets you down? Well, you can do five things. We look at Moses' life and see three things he didn't do, and two things that he did do; and we learn how to deal with disappointment.

a. When you're disappointed, don't CURSE it. Don't retaliate, don't try to get even. Romans 12:14 says, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse." Most of us in Moses' situation would just say, "All right you guys, figure it out yourselves; have a nice time finding your way back to Egypt; I'm going to the Promised Land; forget you!"

Most of us have a tendency to create very inventive ways to get even! In fact, I sometimes think that in resentment we are at the height of our creativity! ("Oh man, I'll just do this and this and this, and they'll not even know what hit 'em!") But do you know something? - the moment you start to retaliate, God stops defending you. Now, whom do you want to defend you -- yourself or God? Who has more resources at his disposal -- you or God? God says, "If you start retaliating, I'm backing off." But when you let God settle the score, you're well represented. Moses didn't curse them.

b. When you're disappointed, don't REHEARSE it. When you're hurt, the tendency is to go over and over in your mind what has been done to you. Look at Job 5:2 (Good News Bible): "To worry yourself to death with resentment would be a foolish, senseless thing to do." And Ephesians 4:31, "Get rid of all bitterness... anger and slander, along with every form of malice." Don't rehearse it! Every time you rehearse a hurt, do you know what it does? It gets bigger; it gets blown out of proportion. It is a very dangerous habit because grumbling becomes addictive, and pretty soon your whole life is consumed by it. So, when you're disappointed, don't curse it, and don't rehearse it.

c. When you're disappointed, don't NURSE it, and feed it, and have a pity party. Ephesians 4:26,27 says, "Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold." Do you see what that means? It means that when I'm angry at my wife or my children or anybody else, if I hold on to it, I have already allowed the devil to establish a foothold in my life, because anger turns to resentment very quickly.

Job 18:4 (Good News Bible) says, "You are only hurting yourself with your anger." Human nature causes us, when we're hurt, to withdraw into a hard, protective shell - "I'm not going to let anybody get close to me." And that kind of attitude can only do you harm.

So, when you're disappointed, you don't curse it; you don't retaliate; and you don't rehearse it to other people until it grows to ridiculous proportions; and you don't nurse it, feed it, and pity it. What do you do?

d. When you're disappointed, you DISPERSE it. You give it to God. Look at Moses -- the people are grumbling, and he's disappointed in them; but look what he does -- verse 25: "Then Moses cried out to the Lord." Have you ever done that when you're disappointed? When

you're disappointed, you don't talk to others about it, you talk to the Lord. Other people can't solve it; only the Lord can, and so you talk to Him. That's what the mark of a leader is - he took it to the Lord; he dispersed it. So instead of pitying yourself and lamenting to other people what has been done to disappoint you, you disperse it; you give it to the Lord. Look at 1 Peter 5:7 (King James Version): "Cast all your cares on Him (why?) because He cares for you." You give that disappointment to God, and say, "Lord, You take it!" And when you give it to God, then comes the last step —

e. **You let God REVERSE it.** You let Him turn it around and bring good out of it. I think you will agree that if anyone had a right to be disappointed and resentful and discouraged and bitter, it was Joseph. He had eleven brothers, and one day they all ganged up against him, threw him into a pit, sold him into slavery, and the next 40 years of Joseph's life was all down hill, and all because some people hurt him intentionally. But God had a plan for Joseph's life greater than even the hurt. And he rose to be Prime Minister of Egypt and was able to save from starvation the people of Egypt and his own family as well. And look what he said when he finally met his brothers -- Genesis 50:20 -- "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good." God intended it for good! Folks, there are people who will hurt you in life, sometimes accidentally, sometimes "with malice aforethought" as the lawyers say. They want you to fail, they want you to "blow" it, they want you to lose your job. This is a "dog eat dog" world. And they mean it for harm, but God means it for good!

If you're a Christian, Romans 8:28 applies to disappointment too -- "We know that all things work together for good to those who love God..." Does that include even the bad things, even the agonizing disappointments, even when people want to hurt you? Yes! If you're a Christian, nothing comes into your life by accident. It's all "Father-filtered," and even the hurt is meant to teach you something. So, you let God reverse it.

Now because Moses handled the situation correctly and responded in the right way by giving it to God, look what God did. God provided a solution. Verse 25: "Then Moses cried out to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a piece of wood. He threw it into the water, and the water became sweet." Folks, it was a miracle! I believe that piece of wood that Moses threw into the water at Marah is a symbol of the Cross -- that tree on which our Lord Jesus was crucified centuries later - that "wondrous" Cross that brings sweetness out of bitterness.

Now I want you to notice something. Verse 25 says, "The Lord showed Moses a piece of wood..." It doesn't say that God created it on the spot. It had been there all along! And if Moses had been wrapped up in self pity he would never have seen the solution to his disappointment. He would never have seen the thing that turns bitterness into sweetness. The fact is -- as long as I'm wallowing in my hurt, cursing, rehearsing, and nursing it, I can't see what God says is the solution. God had that tree there all the time, but the people couldn't see it because grumbling had blindfolded their eyes.

So, the greatest successes in life are often followed by failure — that's a fact; and the greatest services in life are often followed by forgetfulness -people will not appreciate you. By the way, let me say this: I feel extremely blessed in being the pastor of this church, because I feel very appreciated here. I talk to pastors all the time who are discouraged because they feel that

they are just taken for granted in their church. I have never felt that way here at Faith. You people are incredibly supportive, and I love you for it. I don't in any way consider you people to be like those Israelites in the wilderness -- that is not the point of this sermon!

But there is a third thing we learn from this story:

3. The greatest shortages in life are often followed by FULLNESS. There is a turnaround eventually. Look at verse 27 - they left Marah, and "then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs and seventy palm trees, and they camped there near the water." They had just reached Palm Springs! Let's go play a round of golf! Folks, to find twelve springs and seventy palm trees in the middle of the Sinai was paradise! It was a place of delight, no doubt about it. They spent more than a month there; it was the perfect R & R location!

The greatest shortages in life are often followed by fullness; and the question I want to ask you is this: how far is Elim from Marah? How far is the place of delight from the place of disappointment? If you look at a map of the Sinai you will discover that Elim is five miles from Marah! It was just down the road! But they've stopped at Marah, and they're complaining, and worrying, and criticizing Moses, when they are just five miles from Elim where there was a more than adequate supply.

You remember how a few years ago that plane crashed in the Andes Mountains of South America. The plane broke in two as it landed in the snow, killing some of the passengers. The survivors became cannibals in order to stay alive; and when they were finally found, the survivors were shocked to realize that they were only six miles from a resort hotel.

What's the point of this story? Why is it in the Bible? I think one of the points of the story is that too often we stop too soon. We stop at Marah, and we get discouraged and disappointed, and it's bitter and distasteful, and we don't like it, but we stay there. And the message is, "Don't quit; don't throw in the towel; Elim is just down the road!"

Now the question I have for you this morning is this: How do you get from Marah to Elim? How do you get from the place of disappointment to the place of delight? God knew exactly where Elim was, and He knew exactly where His people were. But He did not bring that oasis called Elim five miles closer. God did not bring Elim to them. They got there by keeping on going, and not giving up, in spite of their feelings.

Now, what do you feel like giving up on? You're disappointed and discouraged, and where you are right now may be pretty distasteful and bitter. You don't like it at all. Maybe it's your job. Maybe it's a relationship. Maybe it's a dream.

Some people say, "I don't feel like praying; I don't feel like reading the Bible; I don't feel like going to church; and I don't feel like tithing my money; and I don't feel like getting involved. What should I do?" It's very simple -- you keep on praying; you keep on studying the word; you keep on going to church; you keep on giving; and you keep on serving. "But my heart isn't in it," someone says. So what!

Suppose you wake up tomorrow morning, and you call your boss at work and say, "Now boss, I know that you want me to be wholehearted at work. And boss, I just have to be honest with you -- my heart's not in it today! I don't even feel like coming in. And I know you don't want me to be a hypocrite, so I think I'll just stay home and watch TV today."

The fact of the matter is, most of what gets done in the world is done by people who don't feel like it. Maturity is living by your commitments, not by your feelings.

One Sunday morning John woke up and said to his Mom, "Mom, I don't want to go to church today." She said, "You're kidding." "No," he said, "I don't want to go to church today; I don't feel like it." "Well," she said, "you're going to church." "No, Mom, I'm not. Why should I go to church when I don't feel like it?" "For two reasons," she said: (1) you're 40 years of age, and (2) you're the pastor of the church!" You just keep on going!

I remember a Sunday morning 35 years ago when I didn't feel like going to church. It was the last Sunday of 1956, and it was a bitterly cold day. I awakened at 6 a.m. with a vicious pain in my stomach. It got progressively worse, and when I began to preach I was almost doubled up with pain. I remember hanging on to the pulpit because I thought my knees were going to buckle under me. A few hours later I was on the operating table having an almost ruptured appendix removed!

This morning you may feel that you're living at Marah; and it's bitter and distasteful, and your needs aren't being met. It's no fun at all. Maybe it's a financial Marah that you're confronted with. Maybe it's an emotional or a physical Marah, and you're having to deal with constant pain. Maybe it's a spiritual Marah - "I feel all dried up inside."

Let me tell you something -- you didn't miss God's will. Marah is on the map. And God knows exactly where you are right now. The issue is -- how long are you going to stay there? God led them to Marah, although Elim was only five miles away. He could have led them straight to Elim, but He led them to Marah as a test of their maturity. And God is leading you through your experience just as surely as He led the Israelites through this disappointment.

You see, God will use that disappointment in your life if you will let Him teach you something from it. What is God's solution to your bitterness? It is a tree. 1900 years ago, God took a tree on Mount Calvary, and Jesus hung on that Cross of wood, and He died to save you from your sin, and bitterness, and regrets -- from the crushing disappointments of life. He died to put a new heart in you. And this Savior will never let you down. Romans 10:11 (Good News Bible) says, "Whoever believes in Him will not be disappointed." Why? Because our disappointments are His appointments. Others meant it for bad, but God means it for good. So, respond in the right way. Let Jesus heal that hurt, that problem, that bitterness, that disappointment that you received at Marah. Don't throw in the towel.

Remember - Elim is just down the road!

AMEN.