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Exodus 15:22-27

Matthew 5:22-24

### Throw a piece of wood into the bitter water

Good afternoon, everyone! I pray that you will be protected by the love of Jesus every day, and that you will be able to live a healthy life both physically and spiritually.

I would like to share on the theme of "Forgiveness" for a couple of months. I was 13 years old when I first believe in Jesus. When I heard Luke 23:34, I was deeply impressed by Jesus' boundless love and forgiveness for sinners. "Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.'" Since then, I have been reminded of the people in my life that I need to forgive, and I want to forgive them like Jesus did. I always prayed that if Jesus said so, I would forgive. However, forgiveness was not so easy to achieve. From now on, I would like to share with you as much as I can about the "forgiveness" that God has taught me through my personal testimony.

Today's message is from Exodus 15. Exodus 15:22 tells us that the Israelites had successfully fled Egypt across the Red Sea, and three days had passed. In chapter 15:1-18, Moses, the leader of the Israelites, offered his joy and thanksgiving to God. Verse 11, "Who among the gods is like you, O Lord? Who is like you – majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?" In verses 19-21, Aaron's sister, Miriam, a female prophetess, also danced with the women, beating the tambourine and praising God, full of joy. Verse 19, "When Pharaoh's horses, chariots and horsemen went into the sea, the Lord brought the waters of the sea back over them, but the Israelites walked through the sea on dry ground!" The Israelites, who had been slaves in the great nation of Egypt for about 400 years, were able to go from slavery to freedom and begin their journey of faith with God.

This exodus means that Jesus Christ purchased us, sinners who were slaves to death. Romans 6:6, "For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin." Christians should remember for the whole of our lives, the joy of having their sins forgiven and freed by the grace of the cross of Jesus Christ. With this grace, we will continue our life of faith until we go to heaven.

However, even though the Israelites had experienced a great miracle, they were faced with the ordeal of not being able to find water on the third day of their life in the wilderness. In verse 24, the Israelites grumbled against Moses, saying, "What are we to drink?" When we look at Israel grumbling after only three days, we might think what a shallow and faithless people they are. But, I think it is hard for those of us who do not know the desert to imagine that there is no water in the wilderness. They were in danger of dying. Maybe the Israelites did not say it out loud, but in their hearts they were thinking, "Why did you bring us to this wilderness? Are you trying to kill us?" They may have been murmuring, "It would have been better in Egypt."

We have all been through such trials after we were saved and started our life of faith, haven't we? Especially when we become a Christian in Japan, our co-workers, our friends and even our family are against us. And, sometimes even though we are doing our best to live a life of faith, there are times when things do not go well, which is embarrassing. At times like this, we wonder, "God! Why do we have to go through these trials?"

In the Bible, the expression "bitter waters and bitter roots" appears in several places. Hebrews 12:15 says, "See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up cause you troubles and defile many." The 'bitter root' here is the one that causes us to forget the grace we have received from God and to fall away from the faith, while troubling and suffering us. We need to be careful of "bitter things" like bitter water and bitter roots in our life of faith.

Naomi in the book of Ruth also had a hard time. She lost her beloved husband and two sons in a foreign land where she had moved to be happy. She asked that her name, which meant joy, not be called 'Naomi' any more, but 'Mara, suffering.' It must have been very painful (Ruth 1:20). No one wants to go through a bitter or painful experience. However, many Christians have also experienced this bitterness. Some go through trials such as sickness, unemployment, and natural disasters. They also have problems with their parents, siblings, relationships at work, and sometimes even relationships at church. Have you ever experienced all these 'bitter water, Marah' and anger and grumbling coming up from your mind? It can be very painful at times. I actually struggled for about 14 years with unforgiveness for people that gave me pain and suffering. I finally had Temporomandibular disorders because I slept with my teeth clenched under stress. Also, I had reflux esophagitis and I experienced bitter water coming up every day. I may be biased in my experience, but I found that my complaints were proportional to the amount of stomach acid that rose.

So, what should we do with this bitter water? Moses cried out to the Lord. Then the Lord showed him a piece of wood and Moses threw it into the water. And the water became sweet. In response to the murmurings of the Israelites, God showed them how to make the bitter water sweet. It was to 'throw a piece of wood'. Many theologians refer to this "a piece of wood" as a symbol of Jesus Christ. Galatians 3:13 says, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.'" Deuteronomy 21:23 says that those who are hanged on trees are cursed, and God the Father sent his beloved Son Jesus to die on the cross to forgive us of our sins. The only way to make the bitter water of Marah sweet is to throw Jesus Christ into the bitter water. The bitter water will become sweet through Jesus Christ who becomes life. John 4:14 says, "But whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give you will become in you a spring of water welling up to eternal life." Since Jesus is the water of eternal life, He gives us life. Jesus Christ is the only one who can turn our bitterness into life.

Next, what does God do for the Israelites? In verses 25 and 26, we read, "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 all 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.'" God gave the Israelites 'a decree and a law' and promised to heal them from sickness if they obeyed God's words. God did not punish the Israelites for forgetting the blessings of the Exodus and for complaining. He understood the Israelites' complaints and gave them good water. In addition, He promised them healing.

As you can imagine, there is a direct connection between water and healing. Dr. Tetsu Nakamura, a doctor who was martyred in Afghanistan, put his efforts into digging wells in Afghanistan in addition to treating diseases. This is because clean water was essential for sustaining life and healing. The Bible promises us that we can be healed by obeying God's word, one step further from clean water. This is a blessing for Christians, it is like to kill two birds with one stone. For those of us who have encountered Jesus Christ and begun to live a life of faith, learning and obeying His Word is to make us joyful. Just by doing this faithfully, we can also receive healing blessings from God. It is an amazing blessing. However, some of us may wonder, 'That's strange because I never got healed, I'm still sick even though I'm doing my best in my faith.' Even if we are not healed yet, let's have faith and pray for our healing earnestly because that is God's promise.

Now, there is one word that I would like to follow from today and over all my life. It's from Matthew 5:22-24, which we read together today. "But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother, will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell. Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift." Jesus asks us to forgive on a pretty regular basis in our daily life, but it's hard to actually follow through on this. How about you?

It was about 9 years ago. You all remember Kazu-san, don't you? He was one of the members of our Mennonite Japanese church. At that time, I had just come to Canada and I was a newcomer to the church, not knowing anything about it. I had just arrived in Canada and worked hard, was processing divorce, immigration and raising children. All these things were very hard for me. Because of these, my spiritual and mental condition was quite bad. I was very irritable under these circumstances and had a little trouble with Kazu-san. He was about 70 years old at the time and looked like a straightforward person. Every week, he would ask me in a scolding tone, "Why did you get divorced?" I felt that as an attack on me. When I think about it now, he was worried about me who was facing a miserable situation. But at that time, I couldn't understand that, I was just deeply hurt by his words and behaviors.

Now I can look into my own heart of the reason why I was so angry. That anger was really like the bitter water of the Marah. I grew up being abused by my father. And I was also abused by my husband. At the time, I resented my father because I thought he was the cause of my life being ruined and miserable like this. My father's age was about Kazu-san's age, so when he blamed me, I couldn't be in peace and I even felt unusually angry. Have you ever had this kind of experience? One of my friends, had a bad relationship with her mother and was in trouble with the senior women in her office.

At that time, I was in a state of anger, like a balloon about to explode, so I complained to Pastor Gerald and Rie-san instead of Moses, about what was troubling me. "Is it okay for such a person to come to church?" It was very insolent and haughty. I feel embarrassed even thinking about it now. After that, Pastor Gerald and Rie-san talked to Kazu-san about my complaint, and about a month later, he no longer said anything rude to me.

However, the bitter water that had been rising in my heart never went away. I couldn't get Kazu-san's words and behaviors out of my head, and it was really painful because of my frustration. I prayed about it every day for about half a year. "Lord! I want to forgive Kazu-san, but I just can't. What should I do?"

One day, by the way, an amazing thing happened. At that time, I was working at Izumiya, a Japanese supermarket in Richmond, through Miwako's introduction. Thank you, Miwako-san! Anyway, that day was just a training for the cashier. However, at around 12:00, during the busy lunch hour, the manager, who was in charge of training, suddenly had to leave due to an emergency. I was a slow cashier, so I was left to stand alone at the register. Sure enough, a long line instantly was made in my place, and customers lined up in a row. I was really sweating and felt like I was almost going to cry. I was panicking using English and accounting money at the same time. It made me almost faint.

At that time, I sighed deeply and looked at the entrance on my left. Just then, by chance I saw Kazu-san coming in! The midday sun was backlit and it seemed that he was brightened in a halo of light. For a brief moment, I thought he was an angel. I shouted suddenly "Kazu-san! Why are you here?" I didn't think anything of it, but I was just simply happy. He was also appeared unlikely with a gentle smile that he never showed in church, he told me, "Yoko-san, what are you doing here too? After that, he quickly chose his lunch and waited patiently in line for me. When he paid his bill and said, "Good luck, Yoko san!" and left with a smile. From that day on, amazingly, I no longer hated him at all, really! It was as if the snow had melted in a matter of seconds. It was truly a miracle experience. I was freed from the shackles of my mind and became radiant and free. Through this, I realized that forgiveness is not about freeing the others, but a process of freeing myself. I also realized that forgiveness is a miracle that the Holy Spirit performs and accomplishes, not by my own power and ability.

After that, I didn't have any chance to talk with him, not specifically, at the church, and after a while, I returned to Tokyo. I think it was about two years later since then, Kazu-san's chronic illness became very serious, and everyone in the church was praying earnestly for him. Of course, I also prayed hard for him in Tokyo. After a while, he passed away to heaven. On the day of his death, I prayed to God, "God, thank you for giving me the opportunity to forgive him earlier. I could not have imagined that he would be taken to heaven so soon. But God knew it, didn't you? If I hadn't forgiven Kazu-san at that time, I don't know how much regret I would have had. Thank you so much for giving me the grace to love and pray for my brother who you loved."

It's been about five years since Kazu san passed away. I hadn't shared this testimony with anyone except Rie-san, but I'm glad I was able to share it with you all today. I still feel bad for Kazu-san, who was hated by me just because he looked like my father. But Kazu-san will be in heaven and say with a smile, "Yoko san, I didn't care about that. No worry." I thought that this episode was a sign that I will be able to forgive my father, my ex-husband, and others who are deeply involved in my life.

Today, we thought of bitter water as something that involving unforgiveness. And we also learned to believe in the work of "a piece of wood, Jesus Christ" and to listen and obey His Word. Jesus, who was crucified on the cross for sinners, wants us to "forgive" others too. Amazingly, the more deeply wounded a person is, the more wonderful the miracles and blessings of forgiveness they receive from God. I guarantee that for you because I experienced the more intimate relationship with living God through this forgiving process.

Like me, do you have someone who you cannot forgive? If so, let's start praying, "God, help me to forgive that person." And let's accept Jesus Christ daily into our bitter water, Marah, and look forward to Him, who is eternal life, making the bitter water sweet. And, let us have the blessing of being healed of our sickness!

Let's pray. Dear Heavenly Father! We, like the Israelites, murmur and grumble in times of trial, and even suffer because we cannot forgive others. We repent of our bitter watery sins. Please forgive us with the blood of Jesus Christ. Please guide us with the Holy Spirit so that we can listen to your word, obey and be healed of all our sicknesses and our troubles. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

#### Reference

The Bible, New Common Translation Study Version, 2014, p. 119