



HICKORY GROVE

BAPTIST CHURCH

Life is a Test

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Exodus 15:22-27

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²² Then Moses made Israel set out from the Red Sea, and they went into the wilderness of Shur. They went three days in the wilderness and found no water. ²³ When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter; therefore it was named Marah. ²⁴ And the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?" ²⁵ And he cried to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a log, and he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet.

There the LORD made for them a statute and a rule, and there he tested them, ²⁶ saying, "If you will diligently listen to the voice of the LORD your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give ear to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, your healer."

²⁷ Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees, and they encamped there by the water.

(Pastor Prays)

I feel certain that if you were pressed, you could name four, maybe five, maybe ten horrific tragedies in the last six months. The two most recently talked about have been the brutal killing of that poor girl, Irina Zaruska, right here in Charlotte on the light rail. And then, of course, this week, the public assassination of Charlie Kirk in front of 3,000 students. And I think the tragedy is magnified because both of those horrific events were videotaped and then distributed. You didn't even have to be looking for it. Man, I wish I had never seen either one of those. Sadly, heinous crimes happen every day in the United States. But somehow, these two, especially for us here in Charlotte, these two most recently have gotten our attention, and there are people in this room who have shaken you in ways that you've not been bothered in some time. Maybe

it was the brutality of watching that young woman be stabbed on video, or the camera angle and being able to see close up what happened to Charlie Kirk. You may be reflecting on the fact that I don't really know much about that guy except that he believes some of the things I believe. Look, it's felt different. It felt like a test. I think Christians have been brought into a time of testing. What do you believe about God? What do you believe about the gospel? What do you believe about the power of Christ, about the grace of forgiveness? What do you believe about the truth that God calls us to love each other in the body of Christ? What do you think about the chances of you actually moving forward with joy in your heart and hope in your future in this violent, God-denying world?

Our church is mixed enough, people from all kinds of backgrounds and ages, our church is mixed enough to know that every generation has some jarring tragedy that leaves an indelible mark and then calls the church to respond, God's people responding to a test.

That's exactly what we find in Exodus 15. Think with me now about what happened here. If you haven't been coming for some time, let me catch you up a little bit. After a soul-satisfying worship service, after a soul-satisfying victory, Israel is coming up on their very first real test. Think about what's happened. I'll just catch you up. You've had the 10 plagues, and each one of those plagues were used to show that the God of the Bible is superior to all of the Egyptian gods. After all of those plagues, the 10th one ends with the death of the firstborn. The way people were saved from the penalty of death was that the blood of the Passover lamb was put over their doorpost. Paul the Apostle takes that and says, Jesus Christ is our Passover lamb. And the gospel tells us that if you would avoid the judgment of God, you look to Christ to save you. That's where we get that. So that happens in Exodus. The people are brought out of Egypt. They are set free. They are pushed against the Red Sea. God opens up the Red Sea, a wall of water on either side. The people cross over, and then the Egyptians go to chase them, and God takes the ocean and drops it down on the Egyptians. When that's done, Moses and Miriam, in chapter 15, Moses writes a song. It's so good, his sister Miriam picks it up. She's 93 or 94, or 95 years old, and she grabs a tambourine, and she starts singing. All the women follow her. It becomes sort of a Pentecostal service. They have a great worship service. It's a wonderful day.

After all of that is done, comes the test. This is how I'm going to say it today for the sermon. All of life is a test of what you say you believe. All of life, including right now, including what has happened in the last week or so.

All of Life is a Test of What You Say You Believe

Let's go through this passage. It's a short passage. Let's walk through. I'll point out a couple of things, and then come back and make some application. Join me there at the top in verse 22. The text says that Moses made Israel set out from the Red Sea. They had a great victory, with great singing, it was a great Sunday, and then this test on Monday morning came. Here's the test. There's always a wilderness before you go to the Promised Land. And the test here in verse 22 is that God is leading them; the text says it's Moses, but remember it's the cloud by day, it's the fire by night. God is leading them, and where He is leading them is into the wilderness, and a problem arises in verse 22. They don't have any water. They went three days into the wilderness, and they found no water. It was rocky, dry, and arid. There's no water, there's no river, there's no creek, there's no ponds. There's no water anywhere. They're traveling, and they are now three full days in. Now, I want you to think of it. You cannot conceive three days without water. I'm sitting in this society, and in this room, in this congregation, we are the most hydrated people in the history of the world. There'll be kids getting up while I'm preaching to go out back, what for, a water break. They need a water break in the sermon. There are some of you who can't make it through the morning at church without a bottle of water. I have probably had three or four bottles of water so far today. We have no idea what it was like to be three days without water. This is a genuine crisis.

Now that the crisis gets worse in verse 23, because they walk up to a place where they think there's some water, and it turns out there is water there, but you can't drink it. In verse 23, the word Marah means bitter. So, you could read verse 23 like this. When they came to bitterness, they could not drink the water of bitterness because it was bitter. Therefore, they named that place bitter. They should have known when they walked up, and they saw the sign, oh, this is bitter, you can't drink this water. Can you imagine the frustration? You are three days in the desert, the babies are crying, and the animals are making all kinds of racket. We have run out of water. The canteens are dry. Finally, you see some water in the distance. You go up there, and it turns out that the water is bitter. This is a real crisis. This is a real problem.

But verse 24 tells us that the people grumbled against Moses, and they said, what are you going to do about it? What are we going to drink? You see that word grumbled? It's the first time we've seen it. In Chapter 15, the people start grumbling. They're going to do it again in chapter 16, and they're going to do it in chapter 17. They're going to complain in Numbers and in Joshua, but here's where it begins. They start complaining about Moses.

So, they complain in verse 24, and in verse 25, look what Moses does. They did it wrongly, but Moses did it right. Don't be like them, be like Moses. In verse 25, he cried to the Lord. Here comes the gospel, everybody. I'm just going to telegraph what's going to happen. If you watch a boxer, sometimes he'll telegraph his punches. You can see him winding up. I'm telegraphing where I'm going with this one. Verse 25 is the gospel. Do you see it? He cried to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a log. That word log, I'm reading the ESV, your version might say, the Lord showed him a tree. And he threw that tree into the bitter water, and the water became sweet. Now, I don't know what happened here. I'm reading some of the liberal theologians, and they want to do everything they can to tell you that, okay, there is a special bush in Palestine, that if you get it at the right time, you put it in the sulfuric water, it would make it sweet. Liberal scholars will do all they can to make this not a miracle when all you have to do is say, you know what, the Lord can do whatever He wants to do. So the Lord has performed a miracle here. He did so with the tree that turned the water from bitter to sweet. That's going to be a picture of a higher, holier way of what Christ has done for us. We go to that tree. That tree, touched into the bitterness of our sin, has made us right before the Lord. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

So that's what happens in verse 25. The bitter water has been made sweet, and then you'll see where I'm going with this whole word, test, in verse 25. ²⁵*And he cried to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a log, and he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet. There the LORD made, here's a little mini covenant, for them a statute and a rule, and there he tested them.* All of this is a test. There God tested them. And this is what he said. *"If you will diligently listen to the voice of the LORD your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give ear to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians.* He's talking about the ten plagues. Remember, those 10 plagues were God's judgment on the Egyptians. So when he says diseases, he's talking about judgment. It's

important because of what God reveals of himself here in verse 25 and in verse 26, he says, *For I am the Lord, your healer*. The old way of saying it was, Jehovah Rapha.

If you're not careful and you don't read this in context, you can take that and say, God will always heal you; sometimes with health or wealth. And the prosperity gospel, which I hate, the prosperity gospel would teach that if you are still in sickness and you're not being healed, then there's something wrong with you. The Bible teaches that a whole lot of God's people, even those redeemed and loved by God, walk through terrible things, and he uses that to press you to rely on him. God, your healer, heals us from the effects of our sin, you see.

So that's what happens over there at Marah. Let's get out of Marah. In verse 27, we find out that they go to a place called Elim. And there at Elim, notice the two numbers, 12 and 70, 12 and 70. I don't think that every number you see in the Bible is there to give us some sort of numerology. I do think, however, from time to time, when you see numbers, you can do some simple math. So there are 12 fountains at this place for the 12 tribes of Israel. There are 70 palm trees there. Israel has 70 elders who are living. The 70 elders can go and sit down and get under the shade. You know they need it after all they've been through. What you find there in verse 27 is that the Lord provides. The Lord will provide. All of life is a test of what you say you believe. With that in mind, let's back up and see if we can make some application. How would you apply this? Okay, here's the first point I'll give to you. It's really a statement more than a call to action, but here's the statement. A lot of you can testify to this, number one.

The Christian life is hard

You've given your life to Christ. You've been transformed by the power of God. You've put your faith in Christ, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and now you're on the road of sanctification. You're walking to try to honor God. And it is hard. In the text, in verses 22 and 23, a great victory has happened, a great day of worship. They've sung together. Miriam broke out with the tambourines. And once the worship service is over on Sunday, Monday shows up. Verse 22 says that Moses made them. Don't forget, God is the one leading them. You have a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. He has led them out into the wilderness. God took them to the wilderness. God took them and led them so that they would be without water for three days. In verse 23, when they found the water, it was brackish water. You can't drink it. For

those of you who like to fish, you finally find this giant private pond that nobody is on, and you think, I'm going to go. So you get your boat, and you back it out into the water. And once you get ready to get into it, you see a sign on the edge of the pond that you had not noticed before that says, water treatment facility. You're not going to catch any fish in that one.

They finally feel like they're going to get some water to drink. They come up on it and see, you can't drink this water. And so what did they start doing? Complaining. God had led them there. Look, be careful now. Be careful. Be careful. When you are walking through something that is hard, psychologically, emotionally, physically, spiritually, when you're walking through something that is hard, don't complain. Just because it's hard doesn't mean that God didn't take you there. Where did you get the idea that once you were saved, God is just going to make it so everything works out all the time? What is God doing? We're told, in verse 25, God tested them.

You know, there's a difference between being tested and tempted. God tests us, Satan tempts us. God tests us for our good, Satan tempts us for our ill. The tests are hard on the front end but bless you on the back end. The temptations are easy on the front end but destroy you on the back end. The tests are designed by God to teach us, to strengthen us, to sanctify us, to make us holy, to humble us. When Satan tempts, he does that to trip you up, to hurt you, so that you'll fall into sin, so that your life as a professing Christian smears the gospel and brings shame to the church and destroys your home and hurts your children. God led those people into the desert to test them, to sanctify, so that they might be more and more conformed to the image of God. And right there, right there is a test. Right here is a test. And this test is, do you really believe what you say you believe?

Look, don't be surprised. Don't be surprised when God takes us there to the test. Don't be surprised by what's happened. We live in a fallen world with sinful people. It's a tragic, violent world. Believe that in the test that you're walking through, God is there. He has you there. He's doing something in your life. Take hold of the short little phrase that says, This too will pass. Put your trust in the gospel above all things. We know that the Christian life is hard, but God is good, the gospel works, and the Lord is not done with you. Christian life is hard. That's one thing you might learn from this. Let me give you a second thing that you might learn, number two.

Attitude is everything

What is your attitude like as a Christian? Right there, in verse 24, if you have a bad attitude, this is for you. So if you don't know if you have a bad attitude or not, why don't you ask the people who are close to you? Say, hey, do I have a bad attitude? If somebody asks you that, you tell them the truth, okay? We don't want them walking around thinking they're really nice when they're really not. Look at the word there in verse 24, it is the word grumble. The people grumble. It is to complain. They complain in chapter 15, chapter 16, and chapter 17. They complain in Numbers. They complain in Joshua. And their complaint is not illegitimate. When they ask in verse 24, what shall we drink?, I mean, the question itself is not that bad. I'd be wanting something to drink too.

But it's the attitude. Think about it now. Think about what they've been through. They watched God destroy Egypt. They have watched God with the ten plagues. They saw Him save them through the blood of the Passover lamb. They stood at the ocean and watched God open up the Red Sea. They got on the other side after walking on dry ground and watched God close the ocean down on the most powerful army in the world. They've been led by a cloud by day and a fire by night. They've seen God do so much. You have seen God do so much in your life. Why would you doubt him now? Here's what happened in this text. The people didn't get what they expected to get at the right time, so they failed to trust God. And if God wasn't bringing what they expected at the right time, even though they were terribly thirsty, they complained. I mean, Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch, and 12 times they complain. This is the very first time. This was Israel's response to the test, and they failed it. If this were a geometry test, there would be a big red F right across it. I don't know if teachers do that anymore, but I've had plenty of those big red F's. They failed the test.

The Apostle Paul says, this was written for us. In First Corinthians 10:10, Paul says, look, don't grumble like they did in the wilderness. By the way, it's not a sin for you to bring your problems to God. That's what you do. It's not a sin for you to voice those problems, take those to the Lord. The sin is when you grumble and complain. Look, the problem at Marah wasn't the bitterness of the water; the problem was the bitterness of their hearts. The people thought they were being wronged, thought they deserved better than what they were getting. You know what complaining is? Complaining is a sign of immaturity. Complaining is a sign of

ungratefulness. Complaining is being self-centered. Complaining is a display of insecurity. Complaining is what children do on a long car ride. It's what maybe teenagers do when they're told to unload the dishwasher. Sometimes I'll complain when I have to unload the dishwasher. So how do I avoid it? I don't want to be a complainer or a grumbler. And all of us walk through things, and a lot of you are walking through it right now. So how do we keep from complaining? Let me offer up a couple of ways that I have found helpful to me. Maybe they'll be helpful to you. Here's the first one. You need to say less. Say less than what you're saying. Sometimes, if you're talking and you hear yourself starting to complain, it would be all right for you to just stop mid-sentence, like you had a stroke or something. Just stop. Say less than what you're saying. That's one way. I've tried to say less.

Here's something else. When you feel yourself complaining, you do what Moses does down in verse 25: immediately ask God to help. Just start praying. Ask Him to help you. If that's not enough, if you feel like you have this sort of grumbling in your heart, find something to be thankful for. Wherever you're sitting, if you're sitting in the car, if you're sitting at the office, or you're at home, just look around and immediately start thanking God for some of the things that you see; for the air conditioning, for the roof over your head, for you know what, I didn't get a flat tire today. You thank God for something.

Or I'll tell you what, if you feel like you want to complain, here's something that's been helpful to me. You think of someone who is really hurting or needs some encouragement, and you contact them. You contact them, you encourage them, and you pray for them. Or if none of that works, here's something that might be helpful to you. What's been helpful to me is that a lot of us know the Lord's Prayer; you probably have that by heart. You take line by line the Lord's Prayer, and you take each of those lines to its logical conclusion, and you pray those prayers. I know that Christian life is hard. That's the first point. But number two is that your attitude is everything. Watch Moses. Here comes the third point. Watch Moses, what does he do? Number three.

Prayer is the first resort

What does he do? Look at him there in verse 25. The people are grumbling up in verse 24. Then, in verse 25, Moses cried to the Lord. He passed the test. In fact, you could take verse 25,

this one section, and do a four-point sermon on it. I'm not going to do it, but here's what I would do if I were going to do it. He cried to the Lord. That's prayer. God showed him a tree. He waited and trusted. He threw that tree into the water. He believed in and acted on what the Lord showed him. And then there's a fourth one, which is that the bitter became sweet. He rejoiced in the Lord. What did he do? He asked God to help him.

Look, they accused Moses in verse 24. Why are you doing this? They grumbled at Moses. He was confronted. He was questioned. He was accused. He was demeaned. They railed against him. They falsely said stuff to him. And what does he do? He doesn't complain. He didn't grumble or bicker or fight back. Look, there's a whole lot of us that are absolutely heartbroken by what has happened in our country, and especially right now with Charlie Kirk. We're not going to go destroy buildings, break windows, hate people, and shoot people. That's not what Christians do. This is what Christians do. How do we protest against a culture like that? We come to church. We worship the Lord. You find somebody that you can live with, you marry them and have lots of children. That part is free for all of you here. All of this, all of this is a test. If you believe what you say, you believe it's true. The Christian life is hard. Attitude is everything. The third thing is that prayer is the first resort, not the final resort. And here is number four.

Gospel grace is our hope

It's the gospel. I've been trying to get to the gospel the whole sermon. Here it is in verse 25. Gospel grace is our hope. That's our hope. I've been asked, what are you going to tell the church when you meet with them on Sunday? I'm going to say the same thing that I say every single Sunday. That hasn't changed. You probably already saw the gospel in verse 25. You probably already saw it. So there at verse 25, he cried to the Lord. The Lord showed him a tree. There's the gospel, the tree. Put that tree in the water, and the water became sweet. Now, I don't know what was happening here, what was special about that tree that made the bitter water turn sweet, other than the Lord did it. I think you take this passage and you look at it in a higher, holier way that points to Jesus. Back up and look at the Bible and think of Genesis chapter 2, where we find creation. God has put them in the Garden of Eden, and there you find a tree of life. You flip all that Bible bulk, and you get over to Revelation chapter 22, you finally get to the end of the Bible and what you find there is a tree of life. On the front end, a tree, and

on the back end, a tree. You open the Bible up in the middle, and there you find the gospel. And Peter says in 1 Peter 2:24, there is another tree. This is what he says. ²⁴ *He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree.* This is grace right here. God our Father has shown us a tree. He's taken that tree and put it into the bitterness of our lives and that tree has made it so that we can live with joy. This is grace, brothers and sisters. This is the gospel. This is what God does. This is our hope. We were created in God's image. Sin has made life bitter. God showed us a tree. And it is that tree and the one on that tree, his death in our place, his resurrection for our joy, and that makes it so that life can be sweet. There's hope, you see. There's your hope. There's our church. This is the nation's hope. There's a gospel hope. Let me give you one last thing. You see the gospel there in verse 25, but look at God's provision, number five.

You can trust God

I hope you will trust God. You can trust Him. Do you see it in verses 26 and 27? In verse 26, we are told, you can trust him because he blesses his word. He blesses obedience. *If you will diligently listen to the voice of the LORD your God, and do that which is right in his eyes,* (Here is us walking the narrow path. That's not what saves us. That's what reflects that we are saved. Look at the end of verse 26, God reveals himself to us.) *for I am the LORD, your healer."* That's important because up to this point, if you're reading Genesis and Exodus and Leviticus and you get all the way through the Bible, God continually expands how he has revealed himself. We'll find him as the great I AM in Exodus 3, the eternal self-existent one. But when you read back in Genesis, you find out that he is the God who hears your prayers. He hears. Or maybe you don't even feel like anybody's paying attention. The Bible says, he is the God who sees.

We'll come back to this book, the book of Exodus, and we are told that he is the God who rescues. When we get to the end here, you find them at the twelve springs and seventy palm trees. He is the God who provides. But now he shows himself right here in this passage that he is the God who heals. This is not some claim that he would heal every disease that you have. He might do that. This is a claim that God heals us of the effects of sin. In fact, this is the same

thing that will happen in the book of Numbers in chapter 21. We'll get to that someday. In Numbers 21, the people sinned by complaining. As they sinned and complained, God sent judgment in the form of what is known as fiery serpents. They bit the people and they died. The people called out for God to save them and God told Moses, take a bronze serpent and put it on a pole. Hold it up, and anyone who looks at it after being bit, will be saved. Jesus reaches over in Numbers and says, I will be lifted up. God has shown us a tree of healing. Look to Christ. He will save you and provide for you. All of life, every bit, is a test of what you believe. Will you put your faith in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus? And if you have, will you stand with courage and conviction on the truth of God's revealed word? All of this life is a test. That test is what you say you believe.

(Pastor prays)