

Who/what is Marah in the Bible?

The word marah means “bitter.” The first mention of Marah (Mara) in the Bible is in Exodus 15. The Israelites had just escaped Egypt, with Pharaoh’s army in hot pursuit. The Red Sea threatened before them and angry slave drivers behind them. Then God told Moses to stretch out his staff over the water, and the sea parted for them (Exodus 14:21-22). The children of Israel walked through the sea on dry ground, but the waters closed over the Egyptian army, destroying them all. There was great celebration among the Israelites, singing and dancing as they declared their trust in the Lord (Exodus 15:1-21).

However, three days later, the Israelites couldn’t find water and began to doubt Moses and the Lord. They found an oasis, but its waters were bitter and undrinkable. So they called that place Marah. Immediately, the people began to grumble against Moses. They had just watched the Lord open a sea for them to walk through, yet they doubted He could provide drinking water for them. Moses cried out to the Lord, and God told him to find a certain piece of wood and throw it into the water. He obeyed, and the waters of Marah became good (Exodus 15:24-25). God used that teaching moment to declare to the Israelites that, just as He had healed their water, He would heal their bodies if they trusted in Him: “I am the Lord, who heals you” (Exodus 15:26).

This event at the waters of Marah is also mentioned in Numbers 33:8-9. Marah or Mara is referenced again in a different context in the book of Ruth. When Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth, both widowed, traveled back to Naomi’s homeland of Israel, the women of the village greeted their long-lost friend. But Naomi responded to them, “Don’t call me Naomi. . . . Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter” (Ruth 1:20). Naomi’s grief and continued loss had created a bitterness of soul that

defined her. The Lord helped heal that bitterness through the love story of Boaz and Ruth. Their son, Obed, was like a son to Naomi (Ruth 4:13-17). And Obed grew up to become the grandfather of King David.

The word marah reminds us that bitterness destroys the usefulness of both water and human life that is poisoned by it. When we stop trusting in the goodness of God and see only our own limited resources, we can become bitter. Hebrews 12:15 warns, “See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.” Like the Israelites, when we are faced with bitter circumstances, we begin to doubt God’s hand on our lives. We may attribute negative characteristics to our heavenly Father and may even accuse Him of wrongdoing (Malachi 2:17; 3:13-15; Job 1:22). Just as marah made the water useless, so marah in our own lives makes us useless in bearing fruit for God’s kingdom. God healed the water, and He can heal us when we obey His instruction (Psalm 34:18; Deuteronomy 32:39).