

Jehovah-Rapha

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. – Exodus 15:22-27 ESV

YHWH-rāpā' – “The LORD Who Heals.” The Hebrew word, *rāpā'* has many connotations, including “*rāpā'* “to cause to cure, heal, physician, repair, make whole” (*Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance*). Throughout the Old Testament, it is used in a variety of ways. In Genesis 20, Moses describes the occasion when the prayer of Abraham resulted in the healing of a pagan king named Abimelech.

Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed [rāpā'] Abimelech, and also healed [rāpā'] his wife and female slaves so that they bore children. For the LORD had closed all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife. – Genesis 20:17-18 ESV

The context is important because Abraham had “journeyed toward the territory of the Negeb and lived between Kadesh and Shur, and he sojourned in Gerar” (Genesis 20:1 ESV). While in Gerar, Abraham convinced his wife Sarah to pass herself off as his sister. His reasoning was simple. He believed that if it was discovered Sarah was his wife, one of the polygamous Gerarites might kill him so he could claim her as his own. Abraham had tried this ploy before and it had failed miserably (Genesis 13:10-20).

This instance did not fair any better. Abimelech, the king of Gerar, believing Sarah to be a single, unmarried woman, took her to be his wife. But that night he had a dream in which God threatened him with death.

“Behold, you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is a man's wife.” – Genesis 20:3 ESV

The Gerarites, while polygamous, did respect the sanctity of marriage. So, Abimelech was appalled to hear that he had taken a married man’s wife into his harem. He was also petrified to hear a disembodied voice warn him of his pending death and that of all his people. Abimelech pleaded his innocence, claiming to have acted on the words of Abraham. He had

been told that the woman was unmarried and, fortunately, had not yet touched her. God assured Abimelech that He was aware of the circumstances and had a way for the king to make things right.

“Yes, I know that you have done this in the integrity of your heart, and it was I who kept you from sinning against me. Therefore I did not let you touch her. Now then, return the man’s wife, for he is a prophet, so that he will pray for you, and you shall live. But if you do not return her, know that you shall surely die, you and all who are yours.” – Genesis 20:6-7 ESV

There is no indication that Abimelech was suffering any kind of malady. God did not strike him with a deadly disease or life-threatening illness. But he was facing the loss of his life and he would not be alone. The fate of his entire family and, possibly, that of his nation, was in the hands of the very man who had lied to him.

When Abimelech approached Abraham, he expressed his consternation at having been put in this predicament by Abraham’s deceitfulness. He begged to know what had possessed Abraham to do such a thing. Faced with the blunt-force anger of Abimelech, Abraham didn’t sugarcoat his answer.

“I did it because I thought, ‘There is no fear of God at all in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.’ Besides, she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father though not the daughter of my mother, and she became my wife.” – Genesis 20:11-12 ESV

Abraham had been in the wrong. Not only was he guilty of deceitfulness but he had failed to trust the faithfulness of Yahweh. For the second time in his life, Abraham displayed his distrust of Yahweh’s protection and provision. But God was watching over His disobedient and distrustful servant. He protected Sarah and preserved the purity of the woman who would ultimately bear Abraham the son who would fulfill all the covenant promises (Genesis 12:1-3). There is so much going on in this story. In an effort to assuage God’s anger and persuade Abraham to pray for him, Abimelech showered Abraham with 1,000 pieces of silver, as well as sheep, oxen, and male and female servants. Abraham was going to walk away a rich man. But not only that. Abraham would leave the scene with his marriage and his wife’s purity intact. God had healed what was on the verge of being broken. He had graciously repaired what Abraham had damaged. Had God not intervened and interrupted Abimelech’s sleep with a dream, the king would have ultimately consummated his relationship with Sarah. It was just a matter of time. But Jehovah-Rapha stepped in and made whole that which was fractured and falling apart. God cleaned up the mess that Abraham had made.

But God also “healed” [*rāpā*] Abimelech and his family. God graciously called off His plan to take Abimelech’s life. Abimelech was not sick, but he was under a curse. His fate was sealed unless he obeyed the words of Yahweh. But because he did, he experienced wholeness instead of brokenness. He was given the gift of life rather than death. God had protected Sarah from

being sexually violated by a pagan. He had protected Abraham from becoming a single man with no hope of seeing the promises of God fulfilled. He had protected Abimelech from touching Sarah and from having to suffer death for a sin he had committed in ignorance. Throughout this story, God's grace and mercy are on full display. None of the actors in this dark drama deserved what they received. But the LORD Who Heals stepped in and remedied the situation and preserved the integrity of His own plan and the lives of those who were integral to its fulfillment.

Back to the story in Exodus. Moses was attempting to lead the people of Israel from Egypt to the Promised Land. But along the way, they experienced various trials and difficulties. One of the first took place at Marah, an oasis in the desert that contained bitter, undrinkable water. The people had been walking for three days and the joy of their miraculous deliverance from the Egyptians and their inexplicable crossing of the Red Sea on dry ground had worn off. They were tired, thirsty, and in a far-from-happy mood. They complained to Moses and he took the issue to God, who quickly responded and gave Moses a solution.

...the Lord showed him a log, and he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet. – Exodus 15:25 ESV

God "healed" the waters. He performed another miracle and transformed the bitter water into sweet, refreshing, life-giving water. But the water was not the only thing that was bitter. The Hebrew word is *mar* and it can also refer to discontentment. The people of Israel were bitter about their circumstances; they didn't like the way things were turning out. Their miraculous crossing of the Red Sea had turned into an unpleasant and weariness-producing crossing of a trackless and waterless desert, and they were not in a good mood.

God's solution to the problem was a simple one. He instructed Moses to take an 'ēš and throw it into the water. The Hebrew word is fascinating because it is the same word used in the opening chapters of the Book of Genesis.

...out of the ground the Lord God made to spring up every tree ['ēš] that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree ['ēš] of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree ['ēš] of the knowledge of good and evil. – Genesis 2:9 ESV

More than 162 times in the Old Testament, the word 'ēš is translated as "tree." There is no reason not to translate it the same way here. The text doesn't give the variety of tree that was used, but the outcome is quite clear. When Moses threw the tree in the water, it produced life. The bitter water was transformed. What had been undrinkable and incapable of sustaining life was divinely altered and imbued with life-giving properties. That which was unacceptable became acceptable.

There was more to this miraculous transformation than the Israelites realized. They were content to have their thirst quenched but God had so much more He wanted them to see.

Moses writes, “It was there at Marah that the Lord set before them the following decree as a standard to test their faithfulness to him” (Exodus 15:25 NLT).

God wasn’t content to satisfy their craving for water. He wanted to teach them a lesson about faithfulness and trust. He knew they would get thirsty again. Temporary solutions to temporal problems never produce eternal results. As long as they focused their attention on their physical needs they would never learn the spiritual lessons God wanted them to learn. So, along with the water, God gave Moses a message to deliver to his bitterness-prone people.

“If you will listen carefully to the voice of the Lord your God and do what is right in his sight, obeying his commands and keeping all his decrees, then I will not make you suffer any of the diseases I sent on the Egyptians; for I am the Lord who heals you.” – Exodus 15:26 NLT

It’s important to note that God threatens His people with disease if they fail to obey while referring to Himself as their healer. At this moment, they are healthy, whole, and no longer suffering from thirst. But He is warning them that a fate worse than thirst awaits them if they refuse to “do what is right in His sight.” This would not be the last time they complained about a lack of water. There would also be occasions when they grumbled about their less-than-satisfactory diet and their unhappiness with the manna that God provided for them. What they failed to realize was that their complaining was a source of disobedience. They didn’t trust God. They allowed their circumstances to determine their view of God and dictate the degree of their adoration toward Him.

What’s important to note in this story is that there *was* water, but it was undrinkable. Their problem wasn’t a *lack* of something, but it was that the solution to their need was “bitter.” It was plentiful but undrinkable. It wasn’t that the water was non-existent but that it was worthless in its current condition. And this non-potable water contained a powerful lesson for the Israelites.

The Hebrew word translated as “bitter” is מַר (*mar*), which can also be translated as “angry” or “discontented.” Little did the Israelites know that the water was a symbol of their own spiritual condition. Despite all God had done to set them free from their bondage in Egypt, they were a bitter and discontented people. In a sense, they were unusable. Instead of displaying gratitude for all that God had done, they quickly resorted to anger and blame, and their blatant displays of dissatisfaction were evidence that their hearts were bitter and in need of change. So, God took this opportunity to teach the Israelites a much-needed lesson on how He was going to transform the bitter condition of their hearts. Hundreds of years later, the prophet Ezekiel would record the following promise that God made to His people.

“I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart. And I will put my Spirit in you so that you will follow my decrees and be careful to obey my regulations.” – Ezekiel 36:26-27 NLT

From the very beginning, God revealed His desire to transform the hearts of His people. Their real problem had never been slavery; they suffered from a heart condition that left them bitter, angry, and discontented. Their 400-year separation from God had reduced them to a state of spiritual stagnation and impurity. They had become polluted by the culture and robbed of their ability to be a source of life to the nations around them. So, God was going to intervene and, over time, begin His miraculous plan of heart transformation.

God used a tree to transform bitter water into a life-giving source of sustenance. He had just proven, yet again, that He could meet all their needs. Thousands of years later, God would use another tree to heal the sins of mankind. The apostle Peter spoke of the life-transforming and spiritual-healing properties of this tree when he addressed the religious leaders of Israel.

“The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.” – Acts 5:30-31 ESV

Peter would later deliver the same message to a gathering of Gentiles.

“They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.” – Acts 10:39-43 ESV

Jehovah-Rapha is The LORD Who Heals. But He wants to do far more than heal our temporal and physical problems. He can provide for all our needs and is more than willing to do so, but His greatest desire is to heal our hearts and restore us to a relationship with Him so that will satisfy our thirst for true life and meaning.

“If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’” – John 7:37-38 ESV

