

This story is about grumbling and grace. We need to hold those two opposites in dynamic tension. On one hand, it’s easy to be so tough on Israel’s ungrateful grumbling that we miss how completely human their complaints were. If we do that, we won’t see ourselves in them. On the other hand, it’s easy to miss how gracious God was to them, in spite of their flagrant sin. For God to give them exactly what they were grumbling about is a display of parental grace that boggles the mind. That combination of understandable grumbling and incomprehensible grace points us to Jesus.

The first verse of Exodus 16 locates this episode in time and space. It is exactly one month after Israel’s exodus from Egypt (though some scholars think it was a month and a half). At any rate, they have been out in the desert for a long time. After living for years in the well-watered area of Goshen, they are now in a place where water was limited to a surprising miracle (at Marah) and the oasis (at Elim). They are now headed further into the desert of Sin (no pun intended) away from the Promised Land, in fact, as far from it as they can get. They’ve been wandering for a long time and they are a long way from anywhere. Now their water crisis has also become a food crisis.

Their reaction? *“In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron.”* That word “grumbled” is repeated 7 times in 5 verses. That was the overwhelming, unanimous response of Israel to that place and time. What do they say in their grumbling? *“If only we had died by the Lord’s hand in Egypt. There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.”*

Do they cry out to God for food? Do they confess their faith in the God who rescued them from slavery and thirst in the past? Do they ask Moses and Aaron to intercede for them? No, they GRUMBLE. They don’t say a word to God—not a prayer, not a confession of faith, not a reference to God’s promises. Instead, they express their wish that they died in Egypt along with Pharaoh’s people: “If only God hadn’t passed over us!” We prefer death! And they reject the leadership of Moses and Aaron, blaming them for their situation. They completely turn their backs on the God who has already done miraculous things for them.

You would think that their recent experiences of God’s mighty power would have resulted in a stronger faith. Easy for us to say. If you think that, perhaps you have never walked in their sandals. In our congregation, most of us have never had a bare pantry or empty refrigerator. Most of us live close to stores or food pantries, or at least know family or

friends who will lend us a few days of food to tide us over. Most of us have never felt the grumbling of a completely empty stomach or heard a mother crying because she can't feed her children or felt the helpless rage of a father who can't provide for his family. Israel was completely out of food and they were many days and many miles away from any supplies. Their grumbling was completely understandable, because their "present anxiety distorted the memory of the recent past" (New Interpreters Bible).

Does that make their grumbling acceptable? No. Their grumbling was a distortion of reality. Yes, their hunger was real, but so was God's past record and future promises. Yes, Egypt had been a place with plenty of food, but it was also a place filled with oppression and death. They should have known that God was bigger than any obstacle or problem they could ever face. They saw that over and over. Rather than blaming their human leaders and forgetting their divine Redeemer, they should have cried out to God in faithful, hopeful desperation. So what do we take from this account if all we do is wag a finger of blame at Israel and perhaps at the small faith of other believers today? John Calvin often chided his congregation about how grumbling was a rejection of the gracious providence of God. A stand against grumbling might do us a lot of good morally speaking.

I think about Harriet Tubman. Harriet had been born into slavery, but she escaped on the Underground Railroad. Then she began to help other slaves escape. She made trip after trip deep into the Old South to lead slaves to freedom. Her nickname was "Moses" because she led her people out of slavery. Slave owners posted a \$12,000 reward for her capture, because she had helped so many slaves escape. She took her life in her hands every time she ventured south of the Mason-Dixon Line.

On one trip, she hid with twenty-five slaves all day in a swamp. They had no food. When it came time to move, one man refused to go. They were all going to die anyway, he said, so he might as well die at home. He did not care that he was jeopardizing the lives of the rest of the group. Suddenly he heard a click and felt the cold steel of a pistol at his temple. He heard Harriet's voice. She didn't shout. She just said, "Move or die!" The man moved!

"Move or die!" Moses could have said that! Those probably would have been useful words for the Israelites! But that's not where the story leads, because that's not what God does. You would think that God would give them an ultimatum or at least a good tongue lashing for their ingratitude and grumbling. But he doesn't. He acknowledges that he has heard their incessant grumbling and he's not happy about it. But instead of chiding them, or threatening them, he provides for them. In verse 4 the Lord says, "*I will rain down bread from heaven for you.*"

What incomprehensible grace! After all God had done for them, he might have said, “I’m through with you! You can go back to Egypt. I will not pass over you the next time; I will pass through you as I did those cruel Egyptians. Or I will leave you out here to die.” Instead, God gives them exactly what they need, even though they don’t have the faith to ask for it. I heard a preacher say a while back, “It all depends on you. God will provide, but it all depends on your faith.” Well, not in this instance. Here God by his grace gives to people who don’t even have the faith to ask for his blessing.

There’s more to it than that, of course. God doesn’t give bread and meat and then just disappear into the desert. No, God has more in mind. He wants this experience of grace to do something deeply spiritual to the people, just as he does with us. *“In this way, I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions”* (v. 4). From the beginning of creation and from the beginning of his covenant of grace, God has wanted people to love and obey him freely, so he can have a real relationship with us, not a pre-programmed, robotic response. That has always made it necessary to have a test, commands to obey (or disobey). Think of how God tested Adam and Eve with that tree in the middle of the garden.

Here, God tests his people with simple instructions about how to collect and share the bread from heaven. Each day they are to gather the manna for that day. Don’t take more than a day’s supply. My mind jumps immediately to the words we pray every Sunday: “Give us this day our daily bread.” Share if you have more than you need. On the sixth day, collect twice as much as on other days. It will last for the Sabbath, even though the surplus on other days will rot and be eaten by worms. Simple instructions, with profound intentions.

In this provision of and instructions about the bread and meat, God wants to teach his people one of the most important lessons in life. Your God is Yahweh who has delivered you from Egypt, and all the glory is his and his alone. *“In the evening you will know that it was Yahweh who brought you out of Egypt and in the morning you will see the glory of the LORD...”* (vv. 6-7). In the parting of the Reed Sea and the defeat of Pharaoh, Yahweh gained the glory (Exodus 14:17,18) that has been stolen by all the false gods of the world. Until we know who the one true God is and give him the glory, we cannot live the kind of trusting and obedient lives which God desires for us.

That’s all God has ever wanted. But our small faith and our ungrateful amnesia and our constant grumbling rob us of that life and rob God of his glory. Thus, from time to time, God gives us a special revelation of his glory, as he did for Israel before he actually gave

the manna and the quail. Moses called the grumblers together before the Lord: “*Come before the Lord, for he has heard your grumbling.*” They might have expected some sort of plague such as they had seen in Egypt a few weeks ago. Instead, “...*they looked toward the desert (away from Egypt?), and there was the glory of the Lord appearing in the cloud.*”

We have seen the glory of the Lord many times, but we have often said what Israel said when they first saw God’s provision from heaven. “What is it?” We have seen the glory, but we haven’t recognized it. So finally, God reveals his glory for all the world to see and explained what they were seeing: “*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father*” (John 1:14). That’s what God gave Israel in the desert and what he gives us in our deserts.

This story speaks to us about understandable grumbling and incomprehensible grace. It calls us to listen to God who alone can give us the provisions that transform the desert into a place of abundance.

I don’t often quote Hollywood figures in sermons, because Hollywood tends to produce shallow people and hollow ethics. But sometimes we can find truth even in Hollywood. Rosalind Russell was a beautiful movie star decades ago. She was successful not only in Hollywood but also on Broadway. But perhaps her greatest triumph was her gallant fight against arthritis and cancer. After her death, this little poem was found tucked in her ever-present Bible: “Trust him when dark doubts assail you. Trust him when your faith is small. Trust him when simply to trust him is the hardest thing of all.”

The Israelites began to learn that lesson in Egypt. They had to relearn it when they ran out of food. In fact, they had to relearn it time and time again, as we do. Amen.

(Credit to Richard Donovan and Stan Mast)