

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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GRUMBLING

Exodus 15:22-27; 16:1-18; 17:1-7

The experiences of the people of Israel in these chapters are a case study in human nature. They help us to see, in the unflattering light of day, what unredeemed human nature is like. More specifically, they present us with a case study in grumbling, one of the most unflattering – and most common – qualities of human nature.

Remarkably, these three occasions of grumbling against Moses (and God) occur in rapid succession right after God has miraculously made a way for the people of Israel through the Red Sea, rescuing and delivering them from the pursuing army of Egypt. How quickly they forgot! Or simply took for granted the extraordinary works of God on their behalf. Which reminds us that it is never good to forget who God is or what He has said or what He has done. And it is never good to take God or His power or provision, His blessings, mercies, or grace, for granted, as if we are entitled to them.

MARAH: GRUMBLING ABOUT BITTER WATER

On the first of these occasions, in Exodus 15:22-27, Israel has just crossed the Red Sea and has entered the desert on the east side of the sea. They go for three days in the desert without finding any water, which is not a trivial matter. Some of us may have a hard time accepting this, but no water is an even bigger problem than no coffee (which – I know! – is made with water).

After three days, they arrive at a place they called Marah, because the water there was undrinkable. It was bitter (which is what the word *marah* means). It was salty, dirty, yucky water. After three days in the hot, dry, rocky desert without finding a source of water, the people are hot, tired, thirsty, and cranky. Just like you and I would be. In their crankiness, the people, we read, “grumbled against Moses” (15:24). They blame Moses for their predicament. They murmur against the leader God has put in charge of them. They are really murmuring against God, betraying their trust in Him. They do not trust that the God who brought them out of Egypt and delivered them through the Red Sea can, or will, give them what they need in the desert.

GRACE IN THE DESERT

But how gracious God is to them. Instead of being angry with the people and punishing them for their failure to trust Him, God performs a miracle for the people by directing Moses to take a piece of wood and to throw it into the bitter water. When Moses does it, the water becomes sweet and the thirst of the people is satisfied. Throwing a piece of wood doesn't ordinarily make bitter, salty water sweet. But in this case it did, through the gracious, supernatural intervention of God for His people.

After that, what does God do? He guides the people of Israel from Marah to Elim (15:27), a rich oasis in the desert with an abundance of water and shade, a place of refreshment and rest for the people before continuing their journey to Sinai, the mountain of God, and then on to Canaan-land.

Much as the people of Israel may have wanted to stay at Elim, it was not the Promised Land. God may similarly provide us with an oasis of abundance and refreshment here and there along the way as we make our way through this life – and it is right and proper both to give thanks for and to enjoy these temporary oases as gifts from God – but the oases are not our home. They are not our final destination. God has provided something even better for us in His heavenly kingdom. But our journey through this life often takes us through hard places like deserts and wildernesses, and we must, as Paul says in Acts 14:22, “go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.” Just as the people of Israel had to go through the Red Sea and through times of testing and refining in the desert before they could enter the land of Canaan.

MANNA AND MEAT

You would think that after the Red Sea, and after God’s provision of water at Marah, the Israelites would trust God to take care of their needs. But they (like us) are slow learners. In Exodus 16, on their way through the desert from Elim to Sinai, it happens again. This time their presenting need is not water to drink but food to eat. Once again, it says in verse 2: “The whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron.” Astonishingly, they look back on their time in Egypt nostalgically. They recall the hardships of their slavery and the oppression of cruel slave drivers as the good old days when they “sat around pots of meat and ate all the food (they) wanted’ (16:3).

Amazing, isn’t it? They seem to prefer a lifetime of oppression in Egypt to temporary hunger in the desert. It is not unlike what Esau did in a moment of extreme hunger, giving his birthright to his brother Jacob in exchange for a bowl of soup. It was not Esau’s finest moment. Nor was this the finest moment for the people of Israel. They failed to connect the dots between God’s mighty acts in Egypt, at the Red Sea, and at Marah, with God’s ability – and willingness – to provide for their need in this situation.

Once again, God would have been justified in being angry with them for their lack of trust. He could have made them suffer. Justly. To teach them a lesson.

GRACE AGAIN

But what does God do? Once again, He puts His grace on display. He does teach them a lesson, if they have eyes to see and are willing to learn it. It is a lesson of His graciousness. A lesson of His trustworthiness. A lesson of His loving kindness toward His people.

The people grumble and whine and complain about their situation, and God responds not in anger but with a promise to “rain down bread from heaven for (them)” (16:4). Then the Lord delivers what He has promised: Manna (bread) in the AM and meat (quail) in the PM. This

food is God’s gift to His people. It is an expression of His grace, yet another sign that the people can and should trust Him.

The Israelites have never seen anything like this manna. It was a thin, frosty flake they could make into pancakes that taste like honey. When it first appears, they don’t know what it is. We know that because verse 15 says; “When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other: ‘What is it?’ For they did not know what it was.”

The word “manna,” as you may know, comes from the Hebrew, *man hu*, which literally means: “What is it?”

What it is, Moses tells them, “is the bread the LORD has given you to eat” (16:15b). Moses then gives instructions on how to gather it and what to do with it. They are only to gather as much as they need for each day. They are not to hoard it. They are not to keep any of it until the next morning. If they do (some did) it would (and did) spoil.

There is one exception, Moses tells them. On Friday (the day before the Sabbath) they are to gather twice as much and save half of it for the Sabbath, the day they are to rest from their labors and to worship the Lord. When they follow the Lord’s instruction, the manna will not (and did not) spoil but could be eaten the next day, on the Sabbath. Thus the Lord provides for the people *and* blesses them with a Sabbath day of rest. Another expression of His grace.

Through this experience, the Israelites were to learn to trust God to provide for their needs day by day. They were to learn to live in a never-ending state of dependence on and trust in God. They didn’t all do so well in learning this lesson. Neither, to be honest, have we. Trusting God for what we need one day at a time is not a spiritual discipline that many of us have mastered. It is an area where, like the Israelites, most of us could use some help. The trouble is, we don’t really want the kind of help God often chooses to provide to help us learn to trust Him. We would rather locate our security in the things of this life, things we can see and touch, even though Jesus warns us in Luke 12:15 that a person’s life or sense of security or well-being does not consist in the abundance of his or her possessions.

GRUMBLING AGAIN

The third story in this case study of grumbling occurs in Exodus 17. This time the community of Israel comes to Rephidim. It is the last stop on their way to Mount Sinai. Once again, there is no water to drink. And once again, they unload on Moses. Verse 2 says “they quarreled with Moses.” Verse 3 says “they grumbled against Moses.” But their quarrel is really with God. The real object of their grumbling is God. They are unhappy with God because life in the desert is hard. They want it to be a picnic. They expect it to be a picnic. They didn’t sign up for hunger and thirst. Where is the milk and honey God promised?

WHEN YOU DON’T KNOW WHAT TO DO

By this time, Moses is at the end of his rope and doesn’t know what to do. Fortunately, he knows what to do when he doesn’t know what to do. Do you know what you should do when

you don't know what to do? Do what Moses does. Verse 4 says: "Moses cried out to the LORD." When you don't know what to do, cry out to God for help. Take it to the Lord in prayer. Remember King Jehoshaphat, who, in a time of crisis in the life of the nation of Judah, cried out to the Lord: "We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon you" (2 Chronicles 20:12). When you don't know what to do, turn your eyes upon Jesus. Look to Him to show you what to do.

MORE GRACE

As He did at Marah, here at Rephidim the Lord once more miraculously provides water for the people of Israel. He instructs Moses to take his staff and strike the rock at Horeb with it, and "water will come out of the rock for the people to drink" (17:5). So Moses does, and God provides water for the people. Once again, God meets the people's stubborn lack of faith with an expression of His grace.

GRUMBLING AND US

It is so like human nature to grumble. It is so like us, not just the ancient Israelites, to complain or whine when we don't have what we want, or we don't get it when we want it. And it is so like God to continue to put up with us and to provide graciously for us despite our lack of trust in Him, just as He did with the people of Israel.

Grumbling, I'm sorry to say, is not uncommon among Christians. It is no more uncommon among Christians today, I'm afraid, than it was among the Israelites in Moses' day. Grumbling is not a spiritual gift. Take my word for it. God has not given you or me or anyone else the spiritual gift of grumbling or complaining or whining. Or criticizing others. Because none of these is a spiritual gift.

According to humorist Dave Barry, there are six "Fundamental Forces of the Universe": They are magnetism, gravity, duct tape, remote control, one that is not appropriate for polite company, and the sixth is whining, which I take to be essentially the same as grumbling or complaining. If it really is one of the fundamental forces in the universe, it is a negative force, not a positive one.

There are millions of people in the world who, like the Israelites in the desert, wonder where their next meal will come from, or where they can find water that is safe to drink. We are *not* among them. When I pray the Lord's Prayer, I don't ask the Lord to give me this day my daily bread so much as I thank Him for already doing so in such great abundance. I have never had to be concerned about having enough to eat or drink. But my heart goes out to people who, through circumstances beyond their control, live daily with hunger and thirst.

While there is a world of difference between our life circumstances and those of the Israelites in the desert, it doesn't mean that we are immune to grumbling. Here in northern Virginia, we grumble about the traffic. We complain about the cost of living. We grumble and murmur about people who do things that disappoint us or inconvenience us, people who fail to live up to our expectations, whether it is politicians or other public figures, family members or other

Christians, maybe even members of our own church family. We grumble about the outcome of elections and the bias of the media. We grumble and whine about the ordinary difficulties of life, as if we shouldn't have any difficulties in life. Some of us may even be guilty of grumbling about the temporary inconveniences we have had to endure during the Washington Gas project on our church property, which has taken longer and been more disruptive than most of us expected. I hope it doesn't sound like I'm grumbling (!), because I know a lot of good things will come from the project. And I know that dealing with inconveniences like this is part of the process God employs to teach us to trust Him at all times for all things and to find our contentment in Him, not in our circumstances at any given moment.

One of the most common things we grumble about is waiting. Simply put, we hate to wait. We hate it when we have to wait in traffic. We hate it when our flight is delayed, even though the technology of air travel makes it possible – and commonplace – to do what was unthinkable at a speed that was unimaginable little more than a century ago. We hate to wait, even for a few minutes, in a check-out line or, back to air travel, at the baggage claim.

One major U.S. airport received “a cascade of passenger complaints about long waits at the baggage claim.” The airport executives first decided to hire more baggage handlers, reducing wait time to eight minutes, which is less than the industry average. But complaints persisted. They were perplexed until they figured out that, on average, it took passengers just one minute to get from their gate to the baggage claim, resulting in a hurry-up-and-wait situation. The one-minute walk time wasn't a problem. The problem was the remaining seven empty minutes of waiting for the baggage to arrive at the carousel. So, you know what they did? They came up with the brilliant idea of moving the arrival gates farther away from the baggage claim area. Passengers now had to walk much further but their bags were often waiting for them when they arrived. They didn't get their bags any more quickly. But their “unoccupied” waiting time was either reduced or eliminated completely. As a result, complaints took a nosedive. (From Rick Lawrence, *Skin in the Game*, 105-107)

GRUMBLING GRIEVES GOD

Not only is grumbling not a spiritual gift, it grieves the heart of God. God responded graciously to the people of Israel on these three occasions, but the almost-perpetual drip, drip, drip of their grumbling and whining and complaining and murmuring and fault-finding and finger-pointing and lack of trust in God throughout their 40 years in the wilderness had serious consequences. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:5: “With most of them (the Israelites, that is), God was not pleased.” A whole generation of them, with the exception of Caleb and Joshua, forfeited the opportunity to enter the Promised Land. And Paul warns that the same thing can happen to us, if we allow grumbling and discontentment and lack of trust in God to occupy our hearts.

Israel's grumbling was not limited to these three occasions in Exodus 15, 16 and 17. You can read about a number of other occasions in the Book of Numbers, to which Paul refers in 1 Corinthians 10. The warning from Paul is clear: Don't do what they did. Learn from their mistakes. Don't let unbelief or a grumbling, rebellious spirit take up residence in your heart. Don't!

In fact, as Paul writes to the Philippians, we who profess to be followers of Christ are to “do everything” without grumbling, “without complaining or arguing” or bickering (Philippians 2:14). Why? For the sake of the gospel and our witness. So that our lives may be “a breath of fresh air in this squalid and polluted society” and “provide people with a glimpse of good living and of the living God” (2:14, *MSG*). So that we can “carry the life-giving Message (of the gospel) into the night” (2:16, *MSG*). So that we may “shine like stars” in a dark and depraved world as we hold out the word of life to people all around us who desperately need it (2:15-16).

A grumbling, complaining spirit damages our witness and effectively neutralizes the gospel. Don't neutralize the gospel of God's amazing grace and the power of Jesus to save undeserving sinners (like you and me) by being a grumbler or a whiner or a complainer.

When you feel like grumbling, focus on God's grace instead. Instead of giving in to the urge of whining about whatever is wrong in your life, or with the world, take a moment to count your blessings. Try to remember that someone else is happy – content – with less than what you and I have. Even more, remember Jesus and what He has done for you. And seize the opportunity, no matter your circumstances, no matter your problems or challenges or hardships, to trust God. At all times. In all things. For all things.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.