

Grace and Grumbling

Exodus 16:1-36

I will never forget a rehearsal dinner for a family wedding years ago at which one of the bridesmaids ordered a steak from the restaurant menu. She ordered it well done. When the waiter brought the steak, she complained that it wasn't cooked enough. She made a big commotion and returned the steak to be cooked longer. She wanted it well done! This happened three, maybe four times—she kept returning the steak to be cooked further. And each time she got a little louder and impatient in her complaining, each time she got a little more attention from the others in the room, and each time she seemed to be enjoying that attention and the commotion she had created. Personally, I was embarrassed for her. Finally, after this had gone on for some time, she said to the waiter very loudly, “Just burn it and bring it back to me!”

That’s a little bit of the spirit that we have here in our text this afternoon. God has provided a steak--well, abundant meat with bread anyway. But rather than seeking God’s blessings in order to satisfy their hunger pains, they grumbled. We studied that same subject last last week, when the people of Israel had travelled three days and found no drinkable water.

They needed food and water. And what did they do about it? They complained. They murmured. They griped. But as we study this book of Exodus, remember that when the Apostle Paul makes mention of their grumbling in 1 Cor. 10, he declares that “these things became our examples, to the intent that we should not ...complain, as some of them also complained, and were destroyed by the destroyer. Paul continues,

1 Cor. 10:11 “Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom

the ends of the ages have come.”

So immediately we are brought into contact with our own lives, and I am going take for granted that you will all agree that grumbling and complaining is a bad thing. In that context, my starting point is to recognize that it continues to tempt us as it tempted them. Thus my focus today is not so much upon the exhortation to stop grumbling, but rather assuming that exhortation as a background for our study, I want our focus to be upon learning how to stop grumbling. So as we study the grumbling of the Israelites, this example written down for our admonition, the purpose of our study is to deal with our own grumbling, and that begins with the need to recognize,

I. THE SIN OF GRUMBLING AGAINST GOD’S GRACE.

It is not sufficient to recognize that the Israelites grumbled, but more personally, that you and I do as well. And, that it is a sin. Yet with a focus on how to stop grumbling, I believe that understanding the root cause may well ultimately help you to put to death this very grievous evil. So I want you to identify the reason why the Israelites grumbled. Yet not so as to make an excuse for it! Quite to the contrary. Rather, knowing the reason or the cause for the grumbling is like knowing your enemy so that you will be more equipped to destroy him when you engage him in battle.

The cause for the Israelites’ grumbling, as we see in this text, is something that will have an immediate and direct relevance to each one of you, because we are prone to grumble for the same reasons. I will identify two primary reasons from this text, and the first is that grumbling becomes a temptation when you choose to forget God’s grace. Ultimately, the sin of grumbling is a sin against God’s grace. Usually, we think it is an appropriate response to something hard or difficult, maybe even justifying the grumbling because of that hardship, but actually it comes from,

A. The forgetful ingratitude of grumbling.

You see, forgetting God's grace really is an example of ingratitude. Because God's grace is grace, it is a gift, a good gift. And by complaining, you lose any sense of that gratitude. The example for us here?

v.1-3

At least in Egypt, we had food to eat. That was their complaint. Never mind that we were oppressed in slavery, at least we had food to eat. Never mind that we were beaten mercilessly because we couldn't meet our quota of bricks nor find enough straw to use. Never mind all of that. At least we had food to eat. Never mind that God delivered us out of that bondage. Never mind that God fought for us, and killed all of Pharaoh's soldiers. Never mind that God brought all of those plagues upon all the people and families of Egypt, but spare every Israelite family with his blessing. Never mind all of those demonstrations of God's grace.

They forgot the blessings of God's grace. And that is a primary root of a grumbling and complaining spirit. Forgetful ingratitude. I believe the chief motivation in the Christian life is gratitude, and we ought always to stimulate that spirit, the spirit of thankfulness and thanksgiving to God for all his mercies. Just two simple examples from the New Testament,

Col. 2:6 "As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, 7 rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving."

And, Eph.5:15 "See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, 16 redeeming the time, because the days are evil. 17 Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is. 18 And do not be drunk with wine, in which is

dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit, 19 speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, 20 giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ"

Do you see the prominence of this disposition of gratitude. Particularly, gratitude for God's grace. So in order to fight the temptation of a grumbling spirit, learn to stimulate your thanksgiving to God for the grace which he has bestowed upon you. The Apostle Paul models for us how to go about doing just that.

1 Tim. 1:12 "And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry, 13 although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. 14 And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. 15 This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. 16 However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life. 17 Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen."

Paul never lost the sense of the goodness of God's grace to him, personally. "I obtained mercy...". "I am the chief of sinners." Those thoughts are the foundation upon which gratitude is built. And gratitude is the foundation upon which a grumbling spirit is put to death. That's the first reason why grumbling is a temptation to us. And the second, very much related, is selfishness. You see, grumbling and complaining really are joined and connected with the selfishness of the fallen human heart. And what is so

obvious here in our text is,

B. The selfishness of grumbling.

In other words, for the Israelites, it was all about them. Their desires, their satisfaction, their pleasures. So much so that they could wish themselves dead rather than being deprived of their daily food.

v.3

They were so selfish, so shortsighted in their selfishness, that they even blamed God's servants, Moses and Aaron. The problem was all their fault, "you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

Moses responded correctly, that their selfishness had caused them to blame God for their struggles, so blind is a selfish heart.

v.7 "For what are we, that you grumble against us?"

v.8 "...what are we? Your grumbling is not against us but against the Lord."

Such selfishness. Wanting to find an object to take the brunt of the complaints, because times are hard. Do you see the selfishness in that? It's all your fault! I don't want to deal with this situation, so I will just blame someone else. And ultimately, that means God. It's God's fault.

And where did that come from, in terms of the human heart? What is it, within us, that creates such selfishness? I think Paul hits that nail on the head when he writes in,

Phil. 3:18 "For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: 19 whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame—who set their mind on earthly

things. [He contrasts the priorities of a Christian.] 20 For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21 who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself."

"Whose god is their belly." In other words, they owe their highest loyalty and devotion to the satisfaction of their own physical desires, such as eating. The god whom they worship is the of god physical indulgence. The god of pleasure. The god of selfish satisfaction. The god, the false god, which is identified most clearly as the fulfillment of physical desires.

Now, if meeting your own needs is the god at whose alter you worship, then it is not hard to figure out where complaining comes from. It comes when your needs are not being met. And that is a good thing to understand about yourself. You and I complain because our needs are not being met. You complain because you have believed the lie that meeting those needs is the most important thing in life.

We are told that lie so very often, in so many ways. Our culture, our American way of life bombards you with messages that are little other than, "If it feels good, do it!" If you have a need, fill it! If you have a desire, satisfy it.

And so we see the Israelites in this text. They were into their second month of traveling, something over 30 days. Perhaps they had taken 30 days of rations with them, perhaps they had managed to eat off the land those days. We don't really know. But we know that eating meat was so important that they would wish themselves to die rather than to live without those abundance meat pots nearby. If they couldn't fill their stomachs with meat and bread, if they couldn't completely satisfy all their

physical desires for food, they would rather die. They determined that those physical desires were more important than their spiritual well-being.

Consider, however, Jesus' own words.

Mat. 6:25 "Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?"

So Paul declares of himself,

Phil. 11 Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: 12 I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. 13 I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

Beloved, if you are grumbling, you are not content. Whenever you complain, you have not learned to be content. When you grumble, you have ignored the teaching of Jesus who puts this lesson of contentment for us so clearly back in,

Mat. 6: 33 "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you."

Actually, Jesus puts it in even more direct terms,

Mat. 16:24. "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. 25 For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it."

So please identify this temptation in your own heart and life. And resist the inclination and the deception to make of greatest priority the fulfillment of your own physical desires. And when you

find yourself in a complaining mood, search your heart to see if this root sin might be present.

But there is more here. Much more. Much more about God's grace that would enable us to put this complaining spirit to death. Particularly, a focus that this chapter gives to us upon,

II. THE GLORY OF GOD'S GRACE.

If you would successfully confront the temptation of a complaining spirit, then think often and think deeply about the very nature of God himself—his grace. Consider this very situation here in Exodus 16. Consider God's response to his selfish, grumbling, ungrateful people.

v.4a

You see,

A. God is gracious to his people, despite their sin.

And that's the point. Not to excuse the grumbling, but to counter it with a declaration of God's marvelous grace. And this gracious response is all the more glorious, because it is in response to such ungrateful complaining as we just studied.

Paul says it best to Timothy,

2 Tim. 2:13 "...if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself."

Interesting, isn't it, that God uses a revelation of his glory rather than merely the threat of his justice to rebuke his people. As Paul writes in Romans 2, it is the goodness of God that so often leads us to repentance. What we see here in the wilderness is his graciousness.

v.8

The Lord has heard your grumbling, and he will give you meat to eat in the evening and bread in the morning. And why? Because,

B. God is faithful to provide for his people, despite their sin.

v.13-18

They had plenty to eat! God was faithful, and he made sure that his faithfulness would be remembered and proclaimed from one generation to another.

v.31-36

There is a point to this story, a point that touches everyone of your lives. God is faithful to provide for his people, despite their sin. God is faithful to provide for you, despite your sin. Because God is faithful, and your sin simple magnifies the glory of that grace! There is more on this bread, however, and I will just touch upon it this afternoon. It is the idea of spiritual food. Going back to,

1 Cor. 10:1 “Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, 2 all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, 3 all ate the same spiritual food, 4 and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ.”

The same spiritual food. Ultimately, in the realm of spiritual reality, that spiritual food represented by the manna was Jesus himself.

John 6:27 “Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him... 31 Our fathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written, He

gave them bread from heaven to eat.’ ” 32 Then Jesus said to them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, Moses did not give you the bread from heaven, but My Father gives you the true bread from heaven. 33 For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” 34 Then they said to Him, “Lord, give us this bread always.” 35 And Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst...48 I am the bread of life. 49 Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and are dead. 50 This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that one may eat of it and not die. 51 I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world.” 52 The Jews therefore quarreled among themselves, saying, “How can this Man give us His flesh to eat?” 53 Then Jesus said to them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. 54 Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. 55 For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed. 56 He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him. 57 As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who feeds on Me will live because of Me. 58 This is the bread which came down from heaven—not as your fathers ate the manna, and are dead. He who eats this bread will live forever.”

That’s the bread of heaven. The bread of life. Jesus. And what you must feed upon, most of all, is not the bread which sustains the life of your body, but the living bread which sustains the life of your soul. And the glory of God’s grace is never more evident than when you are able to do just that.

Now, one final thought. One final encouragement and

motivation to help you deal with your own sin of grumbling and complaining. And that is to understand,

III. THE PURPOSE OF GOD'S GRACE.

What is God trying to accomplish? And, how does that help you and me in our struggle with the sin of grumbling. That purpose is quite easy to identify, and it is that realization that will provide adequate motivation to stop grumbling. God is working such that you will recognize that he is God, and he alone.

v.6

When God provides quail in the evening, it was so the people would be reminded that he was the one who delivered them. And when God provides manna in the morning, it was so the people would be reminded of the glory of his grace, as he gave them what they wanted.

v.7

Now, if you carry this principle too far in the raising of children, you will simply spoil them and thus do them much harm. But in this context, God gives his people what they want, more than they could have imagined, because,

A. God's purpose is to make known his own glory.

God provided manna so that the people could see his glory! The same with the meat. And that is made even more explicit in,

v.9-12

All of this is about the revelation of God's glory! All of this is about God's people learning, in their subjective experience, what is written in verse 12, "Then you shall know that I am the Lord your God."

Beloved, God is always seeking that objective in the

circumstances of his providence in your life. Hard or easy, difficult or pleasant, struggle or success, God's makes his purpose abundantly clear. He will say to you, over and over again in all the details of your life, "You shall know that I am the Lord your God."

B. God's purpose is to test our obedience.

God provided manna so that the people could see his glory! The same with the meat. And he tested them with the provision of the sabbath rest as well. We will focus upon that test in much more detail next week.

As we end this afternoon, I want to reinforce this clear connection that we are these Israelites. This journey in the wilderness is the journey of your own life. And the temptation to grumble is, no doubt, often a part of your own experiences. And so, in order to resist that temptation, learn to see and appreciate the glory of God's grace, contrasted by the selfishness of your own grumbling. Learn to see and appreciate the faithfulness by which he continues to provide for you.

1 Cor. 10:11 "Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come."