

The Test of Trust

Text: Exodus 16:18

Richard A. Rhem
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

"Those who gathered much had nothing over; and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed."

Last week we saw Israel set free, a slave people delivered by the mighty hand of God, by the mighty hand of Moses and we noted that that founding story was the story that Israel looked back to when it understood its origins, recognizing that it was created by the grace of God. God with mighty hand moved into that situation of oppression and set his people free. Although that story reflected the ancient traditions, it was written down about six hundred years later when Israel was once again in a situation of exile, when they had lost their hope, when they were about to give up on God and all the promises of the covenant.

So someone rehearsed the stories. Someone reminded them about how they were born out of slavery, out of oppression, out of an impossible situation. How God created them a people and set them free. But there are probably no people in all of history that told their own story with more candor than has Israel. A major image comes to mind when I think about Israel in the wilderness, the image of complainers, and the words of God over and over again, "You are a stiff-necked people." There is one thing in Israel telling its story: it admitted that it was a stubborn and stiff-necked people. The Jewish Rabbi, David Hartman, said in April that God elected the most obstreperous, obstinate, stubborn and stiff-necked people in all the world, and God said "Now if I can make them human, then I'm really God."

As you read the stories in the book of Exodus and the book of Numbers, you will find again and again and again that this people is unhappy, they complain, and they never learn to trust God. They are simply an impossible lot. Well, the situation in the sixteenth chapter of Exodus is a situation where they have no food. At least what they have they are not happy with. They had just seen God provide water out of the rock, but that didn't seem to get through to them, so they complained and God said, "I'll give them bread from heaven."

Now, it is really not proper to try to explain the miracles of the Bible in natural terms, but as a matter of fact, in the case of this manna or bread from heaven, we know that there was a phenomenon—some kind of plant lice that excretes a certain kind of gum or resin and it is edible and has sustained people in that area even to the present. As far as the quail are concerned, the migratory birds would often go across Sinai and sometimes, having come a long way, they would rest there. So that the miracle of the feeding does have a kind of natural explanation to it.

But the point of the story is that God provided for this people in the wilderness. They were set free and set on a journey. The journey in the wilderness was forty years. But forty years in the Scriptures means an extended period of time. There was this extended period of time when they were between Egypt and the Promised Land. It's one of the great models or paradigms of the Scripture – being set free, journeying through the wilderness, journeying toward the Promised Land.

In that wilderness experience, as Israel understood its own past, it saw that experience as a time in which it was tested and the thing that God was trying to create in the Israelite was trust. "Trust me. I will be with you. I will take care of you. Give up your anxiety. Simply trust me." So in the story the Lord says, "I will give them bread from heaven." And here are the instructions: They are to go out every morning and they are to gather enough for the day. We are told that they went out and some gathered a lot, as I probably would be inclined to do, knowing my appetite. Others gathered a little. But the text tells us that those that gathered a lot had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no lack. You see, that's the finger of God in the story. There might have always been that kind of stuff in the desert, but the lesson that Israel was to learn as it told this story, and the lesson that the people were to learn who were hearing the story hundreds of years later was that God is always on time with enough for the day.

Then we are told that some of them didn't believe it. They gathered some extra and they put it in the freezer and in the morning, Behold, it was wormy. It didn't work. The Lord also said, "On the Sabbath Day there will be no manna. Don't go out to gather on the Sabbath. So gather a double amount the day before." Lo and behold, they did, and the next morning it was just fine. It didn't get wormy. Now there were a few who didn't believe that and they went out on the Sabbath anyway. But there was nothing there. That's the story, the story of bread from heaven, a story of how God provides for God's people, how God in the provision [of food] seeks to teach people to trust. It is a whole manner of life.

Trusting is a way of life. Really, so much of the Biblical story is simply an invitation to people to live with trust, because God is good, and God cares, and God provides for those that trust in God. As you think about the story, obviously the first question that the story raises for us is — What is enough? The Financial Seminar which is being held in Track II in Perspectives raises a question. What is

enough? Our worldly possessions, our savings accounts, our investments – all of that which seems to be "worldly" is really at root a matter of deep spiritual concern. A question comes to us. What is enough? What is enough? What is enough in an age of affluence such as we live in? What is enough as we contemplate the engagement of our energies and our time? What is enough as we think about our future?

We are reminded of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, who also with beautiful simplicity invited those who heard him to trust God. He pointed to the sparrow in the tree and the lily of the field. He used creation as a parable to say, "Look, there is someone who is looking after this old world, and after you and me. Live with trust. Be done with anxiety, all of that inquisitiveness, that compulsion to possess." In another place he told about the farmer who kept building bigger and bigger barns only to find that his soul was required of him when he had laid up all of his treasures. The question that comes out of this old tale of Israel's past, "What is enough?"

John Wesley, who was a great English preacher and one who led the 18th century revival in England, raised the question as he observed the people that he was marshaling together into the whole renewal movement in England. He made this observation. He said, "Whenever riches have increased, the essence of religion has decreased in the same proportion." "Therefore," said Wesley, "I do not see how it is possible in the nature of things for any revival of religion to continue long."

Then he said this interesting thing, "For religion must necessarily produce both industry and frugality, and these cannot but produce riches. But as riches increase so will pride, anger and the love of this world and all of its branches. Is there no way to prevent this continuous decay of pure religion?" I was thinking about Wesley's statement: thinking about the area in which we live, thinking about Western Michigan, thinking about our own roots. "Good religion produces industry and frugality. And industry and frugality produce riches, and riches lead to the decay of religious commitment." Not necessarily, but all too often.

Think about Western Michigan. I think about the industry and the frugality of our fathers and our mothers and our grandparents back two and three generations. I think about the considerable wealth of Western Michigan, which is the consequence of industry and frugality, which is a wonderful blessing of God. But the question that comes to us then is: What is enough? Another statement of John Wesley: (I like this statement.) he said, "Earn all you can. Save all you can. Give all you can." That, it seems to me, would be an answer to his earlier observation that when we are blessed we see it as the blessing of God, that it is the consequence of God's good grace, and that then as good stewards we become the instruments of doing good, of being full of mercy and compassion, of binding up the wounds of the world. So, out of the story, let me leave you with a question this morning. "What is enough?"

Then, obviously, this is there too. The Israelites were to gather enough for the day. Those of you who are familiar with the Twelve Steps know that the secret of long successful sobriety is to live one day at a time. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "Take no thought for the morrow." Now that can become ridiculous, of course, if you think that it undercuts any kind of planning or projection of the future. But the point is — Where is our focus? And have we learned to live by trust in God, one day at a time? There were those who didn't believe it. They said, "You know, you'd better gather this manna while it's here. It might not be here tomorrow." And it turned moldy on them. How many of us have not been guilty of overreaching, grasping the prize only to have it turn to dust in our hands? The lesson of the story and what Israel was being taught by God was —today, that's enough. Take care of today. Worry about today, and tomorrow will take care of itself.

Then, this too, which was all part of the same kind of lesson and was a Sabbath lesson. No gathering on the Sabbath. Sabbath was to be a break, a break in that continual day by day struggle for survival. The Sabbath principle was woven throughout the whole of Israel's history. It was a principle that was rooted in creation itself. The creed of creation in the first chapter of Genesis, which was written in the 5th or 6th century B.C.E., was the principle of God's creative activity and then rest. God rested from all God's work, surveyed it all and said, "It's good." And that was woven into the very fabric of the lives of God's people. In the time of Jesus, in the time of Paul, that Sabbath principle had become rather legalistic. They had all kinds of rules to hedge it in, such as the permissible Sabbath day's journey when you could carry only so much. Well, Jesus had to protest against it. He said, "You know the Sabbath was made for humankind. Humankind was not made for the Sabbath."

I don't know about you, but I grew up in that kind of Sabbath legalism. I always tell the story about the visiting preacher who was raised Scottish Presbyterian, which was about as formidable as being Dutch Reformed in terms of the legalism of the Sabbath. He told about singing the hymn "Day of All the Week the Best, Emblem of Eternal Rest," and he thought to himself, "If heaven is like Sunday, I don't think I want to go there." We can make it miserable and the sense in which I grew up was "ugly Sundays." But to react against that is to lose something that is so profoundly necessary for human well being, and that is to have some point in the week when we stop! When we stop and we rest! We give up that compulsive need to generate, to produce, to acquire. Just to stop! To stop, even when it's stupid to stop, because we can conquer another milestone.

The Sabbath principle cuts right into the core of that human compulsion, that obsession of producing. People who are workaholics like I am need to hear it over and over again. Stop! The Sabbath was not first of all for worship. The Sabbath was first of all simply to rest and to delight. I think that in my past the Sabbath principle was violated by the Church itself, where it required Sabbath worship morning and evening and all parts in between. What God wants people to do is to

take time to smell the roses, take time to be human. Take time to let the earth refresh itself and to rest the animals and, above all, to find a quiet place for our souls.

The test is trust. Do I believe in God? Do I believe in the goodness of creation? Do I trust that the good God and the good creation will be supportive of my human existence? And will I take time to recognize that every good and perfect gift comes from God, and learn simply to live with trust? I think that that is the spiritual dimension of our Christian giving. That's the real point of the issue when we determine what of that which God has given us we will give in turn to enhance and enable the work of God in the world. Trust. To trust God is to be relieved of a terrible anxiety, to be freed from an awful drivenness, to be able to delight and to enjoy and to rest in the Lord. Those that gathered much didn't have any over, and those that gathered little had no lack: a vision for a world where everyone has enough, a goal to work at for the people of God, who trust God, day by day.