

*Series – Exodus: The God Who Guides and Provides*

*“Grumbling and Forming in the Desert”*

Introduction: Exodus is a book with several sections so it might be helpful to see where we are as we continue our journey through it. A three-fold division highlights a sense of journey or movement. Each, as well, says something significant about God and his relationship with his people. It sets out like this:

I. In Egypt – the Power of God (1:1 -15:21)

II. In the Wilderness – the Provision of God (15:22 – 18:27)

III. In Sinai – the Presence of God (19:1 – 40:38)

This morning, then, we move into the second stage of the journey. Having been delivered by God from their bondage to Pharaoh through a dramatic rescue that took them across the Red Sea, God’s people find themselves not yet in the land of milk and honey but in the desert, and, after a few days of it, they’re pretty sure they don’t want to be there! But, while they begin to grumble, God not only graciously feeds them, he continues to form them into the kind of people he has called them to be, for their sakes and also for the sake of the world.

As we hear the text, and hear the word grumble eight different times, it’s worth knowing that the apostle Paul, when writing to the church in Philippi about all that Jesus had done for them, goes on to tell them that the first way in which they are to work out his gift of salvation is to “do everything without grumbling or arguing.” Who would have thought that grumbling would be the first sin Paul exhorts them to work on? Grumbling, he goes on to say, will prevent them from shining “like stars,” from revealing God’s beauty to the “warped and crooked generation” in which they live (Phil. 2:14-15).

It seems as if Paul might have just been reading Exodus before writing this! In any event, it might be helpful to consider as we work through the text this morning: “Do you ever grumble against God? Why might you do that? Could it be a place where God is asking you to trust him more deeply?”

I. A Water Crisis

A. The trek from the Red Sea to the mountain at Sinai (19:1) covers a period of about two months. This was a time, we read, of testing, not to see if the Israelites would fail, but a time when God wanted to teach them and train them in his ways so that they could be a holy nation that would represent him to a watching world. As we heard, it’s a time that began with songs of praise, with Miriam, Aaron’s sister, leading the Israelites in celebration of their miraculous deliverance. During this time, I’m pretty sure the Israelites (like us in these tropical July days!) had no desire to even see another drop of water! But three days in and their tune changed. Three days in the desert without water would affect anyone’s ability to sing. When they finally did find water, it was no good for drinking.

B. And so the grumbling began. The people complained to Moses and Moses cried out to the LORD. And the LORD was gracious. He directed Moses toward a piece of wood which Moses then threw into the water and the water became good to drink. While it’s possible that the bark and leaves of this wood had medicinal qualities, there was a good deal more going on here. Go back to the first plague and remember that the Nile turned to blood and became undrinkable when Moses struck it with his wooden

staff. Now, through another piece of wood, God enables the opposite for his people. He enables them to drink. This, the people were learning, is the God who both guides and provides. He can be trusted.

C. With this provision of water in the background, God then reveals to them what this time in the desert is going to be about. It would not just be about singing. Nor would it be a time of anything goes, now that they were free from Pharaoh's oppression. Rather, it would be a time of learning to listen to God and to follow God's lead. If they listened well and followed his instructions, his ground rules for the journey they were now on, they would enjoy the life that is truly life. It would not be life as experienced in the ten plagues, but, by contrast, life that involved a sense of harmony and well-being. As if to give them an example of what this could be like, God then leads them to a wonderful, oasis-like campsite called Elim in which there is a fresh spring to camp by for each of the twelve tribes.

Illustration: Sometimes, perhaps, we imagine God as a kind of divine policeman, hiding in his cruiser behind some shrubs, just waiting to hand out a ticket to a driver going around the curve at 45 instead of the posted 25. Better is to imagine that God has posted the 25 sign because if it is followed, the driver is much more likely to negotiate the turn safely and less likely to have an accident and suffer injury. What motivates the God who calls us to listen and obey him is not a desire to hand out a ticket but the driver's—our—well-being.

Do we think that God has our well-being in mind? Are we convinced of his love for us? Do we think of him as a traffic cop waiting to chase us down, or a careful urban planner wanting to design what is best for all? Do we believe he is with us, even when circumstances might lead us to think otherwise? All of these questions are a part of God's work in us as he forms us to be his people.

## II. A Food Crisis

A. A little over six weeks camping by the springs at Elim and it's time to move on. God has more to teach his people in the desert. Israel is now known as a community, but as we see, they are not yet a very mature one but are still like children who are learning their way. The grumbling quickly begins again when the supplies of food begin to run short. As their stomachs start to growl, their memory becomes selective. They look back to their time of slavery in Egypt and remember it as a time not of harsh labor but as a time when then they just sat around pots of meat and ate to their heart's content...like pasta night at the Olive Garden!

B. Again, God responded graciously. He promised them manna and quail, bread in the morning and meat at night. He instructs them to gather what they need for each day, but no more. On the sixth day, he instructs them to gather twice as much so that they can rest on the sabbath. Of course, some of the people decided to test God. Some gathered more than they needed, and the excess became buggy and stinky. Others went to try and gather on the Sabbath but found nothing. But most, it seemed, after a little more grumbling, began to get the idea. To help them remember this time of provision, God instructed them to take a portion of the manna and put it in a jar and carry it with them. . .

What might you put in your "jar" to help remind you of the way God has been your provision and guide?

## III. Formed by Bread

A. As it turns out, God would sustain the Israelites with manna for 40 years, continuing to teach them that when the sun came up and a new day was dawning, he was still there providing for them,

even if they might have wished for a new entrée on the menu! But the formation using manna as its object would continue long after those wilderness wandering days were over. Perhaps the most poignant is recorded in John 6, right after Jesus miraculously feeds the five thousand. The next day he gets into a conversation with some who had been in the crowd about the manna their ancestors had eaten in the wilderness. They wanted Jesus to give them a similar sign to encourage them to put their faith in him. In response, Jesus simply said, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty” (Jn. 6:35). Now, Jesus wasn’t talking about food and water. He was declaring that there is a peace and contentment, a sense of well-being that only he can bring. As the 17c. French mathematician, theologian, and philosopher named Blaise Pascal observed: “There is a God-shaped vacuum in every heart that only God can fill.” The trouble is, instead of filling it with Jesus, our hearts can lean toward desiring other, far less-satisfying things.

B. What we need to be aware of is that this is the direction in which the world tugs us, and wants to form us, on a daily basis. It tells us we won’t be satisfied until we purchase and stand in front of one of those mammoth, chrome BBQ grills which seems to be what fills any backyard party with fun and happy people. Or we won’t be content until we have one of those minivans with the DVD player and fourteen cupholders because that’s what we’re led to believe our kids (and their mom’s) really need to journey well through life. If we only had a razor with more blades, drank a better beer, used a different deodorant, drove a truck that looks like a car, experienced a new relationship, all would be well. Notice that when such things are advertised, information about the product is rarely the focus. Rather, stories are told and pictures are given of what our life could be like if only we had such products in them. And when we don’t have those things? We grumble...don’t we?!

C. Forty years of wandering, and three biblical books later, when they were finally on the brink of entering the Promised Land, Moses reminds the Israelites of the ultimate, spiritual purpose of the manna, almost as if the actual feeding was a children’s moment and now the deeper point was being made:

[God] humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna . . . to teach you that human beings do not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. – Deut. 8:3

Centuries later, these would be words that Jesus would quote to Satan who was tempting Jesus in the desert to satisfy himself by turning stones into bread so all would be well. It was, we could say, the first of a zillion false advertisements! However, Jesus knew that this kind of bread would ultimately not satisfy, and encourages us to discern such as well.

D. So, if we are to shine like stars and reflect God’s goodness and glory to the world around us, that he is worthy of our trust, we may need to begin with our grumbling. When you find yourself grumbling, try to get behind it, try to ask, what is the root of my grumbles? Where am I not content? Why am I not content? Where am I seeking satisfaction? Could this be a place where Jesus is inviting me to feed on him more deeply? How might I do that?

Jesus is the bread of life. Nourish yourself with him daily as you listen to his word and talk to him in prayer, ponder his cross and resurrection, and take in the beauty of his creation. He is the only thing that can satisfy the longing that is deep within your heart.