
Bread in the Wilderness

Exodus 15:21-16:35

Introduction It is so easy to go from great highs to deep lows.

Think of college football's South Florida. Over a perfect season, had climbed the polls and hoped to break in to the BCS ratings. Finally, last week, they were ranked #2 in the nation. What a high for the team! Then Thursday came and a 30-27 defeat at the hand of Rutgers. What a hard moment!

How many first time parents go from the high of the new baby at the hospital to the lows of no sleep, constant crying and unexpected and weighty responsibilities? Those emotional plunges can be deep and difficult.

So, what would you expect from Israel in the days after the great victory at the Red Sea and the celebration that followed? We would hope that some level of real faith, glad submission and steadiness would come in the wake of such a deliverance. But alas, it was not so.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer is cited by Phillip Ryken as writing:

We, too, pass through the Red Sea, through the desert, across the Jordan into the promised land. With Israel we fall into doubt and unbelief and through punishment and repentance experience again God's help and faithfulness. All this is not mere reverie but holy, godly reality. We are torn out of our own existence and set down in the midst of the holy history of God on earth. There God dealt with us, and there He still deals with us, our needs and our sins, in judgment and grace.

We will find ourselves in this story, and probably not like what we see.

The Pattern for the Pilgrimage (v.22-27)

As they journey away from the Red Sea, they are beginning their pilgrimage towards the Promised Land. This short narrative gives them a pattern for the rest of their wilderness wanderings. What unfolds here points us to our own pilgrimage as well. As we travel between the cross and the crown in redemptive history, as we travel between our salvation and our arrival in heaven, we are on a pilgrimage. We have a decisive deliverance from the sphere, the realm of sin. But it is still hard. The hardness *is a part of God's design*.

The Providences of God in Hardship (v.22-25a)

²² Then Moses made Israel set out from the Red Sea, and they went into the wilderness of Shur. They went three days in the wilderness and found no water. ²³ When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter; therefore it was named Marah. ²⁴ And the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?" ²⁵ And he cried to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a log, and he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet.

Three days away from the Red Sea and they have no water. They are in a wilderness. It is dry and barren, albeit not a desert. A small nation, traveling together in

a miles long caravan is beginning to run out of water. Finally, they arrive at a place where there is water. Hopefully, in some ordered fashion they begin to queue up to fill their water jugs. Someone dips their cup into the water and brings up to their lips. They immediately spit it out. It is bitter, nasty, undrinkable.

O, the outcry! Here is water they need but cannot drink. Faithless hearts and fainting bodies turn grumbling tongues to lash leaders. They murmur and complain. Yes, they have cause – they are thirsty and the water is bad. But they are not explaining a situation seeking a solution. They are simply grumbling over their lot.

Sad what three days of growing hardship can do to people who have just decisively been delivered and have passionately praised their mighty God. But, this is us. Sunday worship and word and fellowship can be great. But by Wednesday, the ugly reality of our own tendency toward sin in the midst of hardships and troubles emerges in grumbling and complaining.

Moses responds as he should. He turns to the Lord and cries out to Him. So God shows Moses the solution. There at hand is a log. Throw it into the water. And all will be well. Moses hears what God says. He does what God says. The waters are “healed”. They are turned from bitter to sweet. They are provisioned for the time they are there and for the next, short phase of the journey.

The Purposes of God through Hardship (v.25b-26)

There the LORD made for them a statute and a rule, and there he tested them, ²⁶ saying, “If you will diligently listen to the voice of the LORD your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give ear to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, your healer.”

Now the Lord explains His purposes for them through hardship. He gives a command and He explains why this has happened. A distinct connection is being made. They will be taught. They will be given commands. They will be tested. How they respond to the testing determines what their consequences will be.

In order to pass the testing God brings through hardship, they must diligently listen to God. They must immediately obey God. They must do so in the view or the sight of God; that is, in a way pleasing to God. When they do so, God will withhold the chastening that he poured out on the Egyptians. Now, this is not a promise either to them or to us of perfect health. It is God’s showing His purpose to chasten and correct His people through the giving and withholding of, in this case, physical health.

Finally, God expects Israel to connect the bitterness of the water and the hardness of chastening. In both cases, the LORD is the healer. He heals the water through Moses’ obedience. He will withhold disease from them as they pass the tests. Thus, we see over and over again that through the wilderness wanderings, disobedience is followed by the same kinds of plagues as fell on Egypt. Those same kind of plagues will fall on the unbelieving in the final days of God’s wrath.

The Provisions of God out of Hardship (v.27)

²⁷ Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees, and they encamped there by the water.

Even in the midst of hardships, God may provide with lavish abundance. Leaving the water of Marah to journey back out into the desert was probably hard. But just a short journey brought them to Elim, a vast oasis with one spring of water for each of the twelve tribes. There was also a palm tree for each of the seventy elders of the nation to sit under. For a vast throng snaking their way through an arid land, this was abundance in deed. Water, rest, shade, grass - here God was giving sweet respite.

God brings His people through a pilgrimage of hardships, difficulties and pains. For their pilgrimage, He gives them His Word for them to hear and heed. He tests them through the sufferings He allows. He blesses and chastens them for their good. Even in the midst of the hardships of the pilgrimage, He brings them to Elims, to times of richness spiritually and sometimes, physically. This is the pattern for the pilgrimage.

The Struggle in the Pilgrimage (16:1-36)

Having shown them the pattern for the pilgrimage, now the struggle begins in earnest. The problem for the preacher is that the message ought to cover all the way down through Exodus 17:7. Notice how this larger section is structured:

The trouble of bitter waters (15:22-27)
 The provision of the healing tree
 The trouble of no food (16:1-36)
 The provision of the manna
 The trouble of no water (17:1-7)
 The provision of water from the rock

But for the rest of our time together, let's look at this section and map over it the template, the pattern we have just seen.

In its Difficult Problem (16:1-3)

16 They set out from Elim, and all the congregation of the people of Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. ² And the whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, ³ and the people of Israel said to them, "Would that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

It has now been 45 days since the Passover and the cross of the Red Sea. There have been around 30 – 40 days of travel from Elim. God has taught them to depend on Him. He has shown them that when they call on Him, He will respond and meet their need. Now, they are traveling through a barren wilderness. They have begun to run out of food. Here are God's people with a mighty God who has saved them from Egypt, taken them through the Red Sea, turned bitter waters

to sweet and led them to the Oasis of Elim. But of course, that was a month ago and they are hungry now.

Here is the testing by God. His providences are serving His purposes. This seems obvious to us except of course, when it is happening to us. How do they respond? “The whole congregation grumbled against Moses and Aaron.” Ok, this is no fun. One and half million people are voting for *your* resignation because *they* have failed to adequately plan for the journey.

But there is something else here that is even more startling. Each of these families has herds, flocks and beasts in tow. They are complaining about having no food while it bleats, brays and moos right outside their tents. In other words, they are unwilling to spend their own resources to provide for themselves. They want someone else to take care of them. The Jewish Mosaic welfare system is getting *their* vote.

Listen to their complaint. “Would that we had died...” I can see Moses and Aaron looking at one another, rolling their eyes and whispering, “Too much drama!” See the grass is greener where you aren’t. Egypt was a really nice place for food. Bread was plentiful. The fleshpots were right by your hand. The refrigerators bulged with delicacies.

So, why do people grumble? Why do people complain? There are lots of reasons for sinful discontent that leads to sinful grumbling. Four heart sources are evident here and are repeated throughout Exodus and Numbers.

PEOPLE GRUMBLE BECAUSE THEY ARE UNWILLING TO SACRIFICE AND TO SUFFER. God will often bring the kind of hardships that expose where people will simply not give up what is dearest to their heart even for basic necessities.

PEOPLE GRUMBLE BECAUSE THEY HAVE UNREASONABLE EXPECTATIONS. God may bring certain kinds of hardships to test whether our desires and expectations are submitted to Him. Food is a necessity of life. But the expectation that the pilgrimage would be like Egypt is unreasonable and foolish. It is through great hardships that we will enter the kingdom (Acts 14:22).

PEOPLE GRUMBLE BECAUSE THEY HAVE A FALSE VIEW OF THE PAST. This false view may exaggerate the good of the past and downplay the bad of the past. Even when we lie to ourselves and believe myths about the past or future, we will desire the promises of that myth and complain when we don’t have it.

PEOPLE GRUMBLE SO THEY CAN SHIFT THE BLAME TO OTHERS. It is Moses (and ultimately, God) who has brought them into this hardship. But it is easier to blame them for the failure rather than seek God for the solution. People will grumble and complain simply to shift the blame to others so that they do not have to be responsible for a solution.

In its Gracious Intervention

(v.4-12)

⁴ Then the LORD said to Moses, "Behold, I am about to rain bread from heaven for you, and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in my law or not. ⁵ On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather daily." ⁶ So Moses and Aaron said to all the people of Israel, "At evening you shall know that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt, ⁷ and in the morning you shall see the glory of the LORD, because he has heard your grumbling against the LORD. For what are we, that you grumble against us?" ⁸ And Moses said, "When the LORD gives you in the evening meat to eat and in the morning bread to the full, because the LORD has heard your grumbling that you grumble against him— what are we? Your grumbling is not against us but against the LORD."

⁹ Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole congregation of the people of Israel, 'Come near before the LORD, for he has heard your grumbling.'" ¹⁰ And as soon as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the people of Israel, they looked toward the wilderness, and behold; the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud. ¹¹ And the LORD said to Moses, ¹² "I have heard the grumbling of the people of Israel. Say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread. Then you shall know that I am the LORD your God.'"

The Lord graciously steps in to provide. At the beginning of the pilgrimage, God is doing early childhood training. He calls their sin what it is. But He is at work in their situations and through His gracious provision to both test their hearts and meet their needs. God declares that He will provide, but with guidelines, with commands. They will have an amazing, supernatural provision yet must partake of it in humble obedience to God's commands. The way in which God gives His provision and the commands by which His provision is enjoyed may be entirely arbitrary. But in this God is testing them (v.4).

So, God announces that he will send food from heaven. In the morning, they are to gather only what is needed for their family for that day. On the sixth day, they are to gather enough for two days so that they will not gather on the Sabbath. God will provide for them every day. But they must obey what God commands.

Moses and Aaron also declare that God's people must be careful about grumbling. God will bring meat in the next evening so that they will know that He has brought them out of Egypt. He will give them bread in the morning so that will see the glory of God. But they need to realize that their complaining against Moses and Aaron, who are doing what God tells them to, is complaining against God.

In its Amazing Provision

(v.13-30)

¹³ In the evening quail came up and covered the camp, and in the morning dew lay around the camp. ¹⁴ And when the dew had gone up, there was on the face of the wilderness a fine, flake-like thing, fine as frost on the ground. ¹⁵ When the people of Israel saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat." ¹⁶ This is what the LORD has commanded: 'Gather of it, each one of you, as much as he can eat. You shall each take an omer; according to the number of the persons that each of you has in his tent.'" ¹⁷ And the people of Israel did so. They gathered some more, some less. ¹⁸ But when they measured it with an omer, whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack. Each of them gathered as much as he could eat. ¹⁹ And Moses said to them, "Let no one leave any of it over till the morning." ²⁰ But they did not listen to Moses. Some left part of it till the morning, and it bred

worms and stank. And Moses was angry with them. ²¹ Morning by morning they gathered it, each as much as he could eat; but when the sun grew hot, it melted.

That evening, quail covered the camp. Presumably the people gathered them up, prepared them and feasted on them. They went to sleep with full stomachs. In the morning, they awoke to find the ground covered in what looked like dew but was in fact a powder or flake like substance (think, corn flakes?). Can you hear the hubbub as people awaken and then begin to shout to neighbors, “Hey, get up and come look at this. What is it?” This question becomes its name. Manna simply means, “What is it”.

Here are God’s provision and precepts. Moses explains what it is and then reiterates God’s commandments. This is exactly what they are to do in order to rightly partake of God’s blessing. They cannot procrastinate until later in the day. They are only to gather up a certain amount. What they gathered, they were to eat. Don’t plan to store it up over night so that you don’t have to gather tomorrow. But on Friday morning, you have to gather for both Friday and Saturday. These commands are given with no explanation as to why.

Clear, simple, easy to follow instructions. Yet, some will not listen. They gather more than is needed or don’t eat all that is gathered. The extra left over night rotted, bred worms and stank. During the week, everyone settles into the routine.

²² On the sixth day they gathered twice as much bread, two omers each. And when all the leaders of the congregation came and told Moses, ²³ he said to them, “This is what the LORD has commanded: ‘Tomorrow is a day of solemn rest, a holy Sabbath to the LORD; bake what you will bake and boil what you will boil, and all that is left over lay aside to be kept till the morning.’” ²⁴ So they laid it aside till the morning, as Moses commanded them, and it did not stink, and there were no worms in it. ²⁵ Moses said, “Eat it today, for today is a Sabbath to the LORD; today you will not find it in the field. ²⁶ Six days you shall gather it, but on the seventh day, which is a Sabbath, there will be none.”

On the day that they gather twice as much, a report is made to Moses and Aaron. Now the reason for the extra gathering is given. Here a rationale is given after the opportunity to obey has passed. The reason that they are to gather double is because the next day is the Sabbath. The holy Sabbath was to be a daily of solemn rest. Between Genesis 2:2-3 and here, there is not one mention of the Sabbath. The Sabbath rest of God at creation was broken by the Fall. God then went back to work until the cross when, at the cry, “It is finished,” God rested once again as the new creation’s Sabbath rest was inaugurated.

So Israel, at this point, is being introduced to the idea of a Sabbath rest. Remember that at this point in their history, on this day when Moses is talking to them, the book of Genesis is not yet written. In other words, what is recorded here is happening and there is no Scripture yet. So, while we get here knowing God rested after creation, it is likely they don’t know that clearly yet.

Moses clarifies what they are to do and establishes the core function of the Sabbath. Now that they have gathered, they must, on Friday, bake bread or boil porridge using all they have gathered. They must neither gather nor cook on the Sabbath. From the very beginning of the giving of this command, there is to be

rest for the worker in his vocation, the gathering in the field. There is to be rest for the worker in her home, the cooking in the kitchen.

Now, some are already wondering what we teach about the Sabbath. I will develop this more when we get to Exodus 20. Suffice it to say that the Sabbath has been kept by Christ for us, has been fulfilled at the cross, our salvation rest has been entered into by faith and so we no longer ought or can work for righteousness. Unbelievers must keep the Sabbath for they are still under the rule of the Law. All those who work for their salvation and do not enter into faith's rest are under the curse of the law and eternal condemnation as Sabbath breakers.

²⁷ On the seventh day some of the people went out to gather, but they found none. ²⁸ And the LORD said to Moses, "How long will you refuse to keep my commandments and my laws?" ²⁹ See! The LORD has given you the Sabbath; therefore on the sixth day he gives you bread for two days. Remain each of you in his place; let no one go out of his place on the seventh day." ³⁰ So the people rested on the seventh day.

So, Saturday dawns. It is a bright and beautiful day. The Lord looks out over the quiet tents of His people and behold, a few are out with their omer baskets in their arms. They are puzzled. Then perplexed. Then angry or ashamed. They fully expected that there would be the manna even though they disobeyed. The Lord is angry with them. He chastises Moses and commands that these people honor the day. Frankly, I do not doubt that on any given Sabbath, you would find some Israelites out trying to figure out why there was no manna.

In its Lasting Lesson

(v.31-36)

³¹ Now the house of Israel called its name manna. It was like coriander seed, white, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey. ³² Moses said, "This is what the LORD has commanded: 'Let an omer of it be kept throughout your generations, so that they may see the bread with which I fed you in the wilderness, when I brought you out of the land of Egypt.'" ³³ And Moses said to Aaron, "Take a jar, and put an omer of manna in it, and place it before the LORD to be kept throughout your generations." ³⁴ As the LORD commanded Moses, so Aaron placed it before the testimony to be kept. ³⁵ The people of Israel ate the manna forty years, till they came to a habitable land. They ate the manna till they came to the border of the land of Canaan. ³⁶ (An omer is the tenth part of an ephah.)

Here are 40 years of God's supernatural provision. Every week, six days a week, this sweet source of sustenance was given and gathered. But there is coming a promised day when the manna will no longer fall for it will no longer be needed. There is coming a day when Israel will enter Canaan, the land flowing with milk and honey. So, in view of ensuring that the lesson of manna is not forgotten down through the years, a pot of manna was gathered and preserved by some means of which we are not told. This was to be constant testimony to the provision of God for the pilgrimage.

In conclusion, remember these important lessons from God's Word here.

Conclusion

God is at work to use the hardships, difficulties and suffering of our pilgrimage to transform us and to test us. In each situation we have the opportunity to obey God from the heart and to walk in practical, godly wisdom. Do you believe this in such a way that you respond to hardships with obedience?

Beware of a grumbling, complaining spirit. When you hear yourself sinfully discontented, complaining about your life, your leaders, your lot, know that you need to repent. While there are other causes to complaining, repent of being unwilling to sacrifice and to suffer. Examine and evaluate your expectations. Carefully consider whether you exaggerate the good of the past and downplay the bad of the past. Repent of shifting the blame for problems to others when you can be a part of the solution.

Partake of the manna, the bread of life. Jesus is the true manna, come down from heaven. Listen to John 6:25-51:

Jesus then said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always."

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."

So the Jews grumbled about him, because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." They said, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, 'I have come down from heaven?'" Jesus answered them, "Do not grumble among yourselves. No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day. It is written in the Prophets, 'And they will all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me— not that anyone has seen the Father except he who is from God; he has seen the Father. Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." [ESV]

So the tree that turns the bitter to sweet is the bread that sustains in the wilderness. Here is the one who gives living water and is the bread of life, our Lord Jesus Christ. At the center of our struggle in the pilgrimage is whether we will partake daily of the bread of life, the Word of God so that we partake of the life-giving strength of the Spirit. In taking in the Word of God, we are sustained and strengthened for the hardships and difficulties of the long pilgrimage home.