

Grumbling at God

Exodus 15:22-17:7

Introduction

Let us read an interesting passage of scripture. It is, in a sense, a commentary on what occurred in Exodus, chapter 15, as well as throughout the history of the Israelite nation.

Turn to I Corinthians, chapter 10. In verses 1 through 5, Paul is writing to the church in Corinth, saying,

For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea;

and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea;

and all ate the same spiritual food;

and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ.

Nevertheless, with most of them God was not well-pleased; for they were laid low in the wilderness.

Now note verses 6 through 8. This is for the New Testament Christian.

Now these things happened as examples for us, that we would not crave evil things as they also craved.

Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink, and stood up to play."

Nor let us act immorally, as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in one day.

That was an act of God's judgment. Continue to verses 9 through 12.

Nor let us try the Lord, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the serpents.

Nor grumble, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer.

Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.

Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall.

It is interesting that the record of the Israelite's failure and the consequences was given so that you and I, by observing their failure, might learn how to succeed. We learn from the kind of lifestyle they lived; by the things they did that did not please God. We then, in turn, by learning from history, might learn how to please God. That is why we have been given the record.

Let us now turn to Exodus, chapter 15, where the story unfolds. We will make three stops. We will briefly go through the text of scripture to discover what happened to the Israelites and then, look at what it means to you and me, by way of application.

A Pool of Bitter Water . . . and a Tree

The first stop in this story in the Israelites' history begins in verse 22 of Exodus, chapter 15.

Then Moses led Israel from the Red Sea, and they went out into the wilderness of Shur;

and they went three days in the wilderness and found no water.

The Israelites have just come through the Red Sea and have sung a song of great praise to God. Now, Moses leads them into the wilderness of Shur, which is probably the eastern border of Egypt stretching up to the southern portion of Palestine. From what I have read and the pictures I have seen, this region is still a very barren region today, with very little vegetation. That is where God will take the Israelites for this first stopping place – the wilderness of Shur.

The text tells us that they “found no water.” They went, in fact, three days without water.

Imagine that you are one of that approximately two and a half million company of people that is trekking through the wilderness of Shur. The first day, you feel the heat of the sun and the sand, and the wind whips at your body. You probably feel your wineskin getting rather muggy and warm and the water does not taste very good. The second day into the trip, you are beginning to feel a little anxious for a fresh store of water, but there is still none. The third day, you begin to rejoice with the others because water has been sighted. There is water ahead at Marah, so you think. God has finally provided. However, note verse 23.

And when they came to Marah, they could not drink the waters of Marah, for they were bitter . . .

“Marah” means “bitterness”. So they come to that pool of water, which may have been a small lake, and plunge into it. However, it is not long before the cries are heard, “Don’t drink this. It’s bitter water. You’ll get sick.”

The Israelites thought the end of their long and tiring journey would occur. They thought they could drink water and refresh themselves. Instead, they have to stand back and look at all of that water, but not drink any of it.

So what happens? Look at verse 24a.

So the people grumbled at Moses . . .

You will find this phrase five times in the passage we will study today. Grumbling is a characteristic of the Israelite. In fact, in I Corinthians, chapter 10, it says that one of their failures, one of their great weaknesses was that they grumbled at God and at Moses. Verse 24 says,

So the people grumbled at Moses, saying, “What shall we drink?”

So Moses, of course, goes to God, in verse 25. Note the Lord’s solution.

Then he [Moses] cried out to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a tree; and he threw it into the waters and the waters become sweet.

. . .

I can just imagine myself being there. We grumble at Moses, “Moses, you’ve led us to a place where we can’t drink water. Go to God and find out what’s happening.”

Moses goes to God, comes back, and we ask, “Well, did God tell you? What are we going to do?”

Moses replies, “Well, you see that tree over there by the water? Somebody go over there and cut it down.”

Someone chops the tree down and Moses says, “Now throw it in the water.”

They throw the tree in the water and Moses says, “You can drink it now.”

Two and a half million people scratch their heads and say, “Moses, you take the first drink.”

I would imagine they all watched Moses dip down in the water with his hand, pull up some and drink it. Then, they watched his face to see how he responds.

This is the most ridiculous solution in the world!

They say, “The water is bitter; you can’t drink it.”

What does God say?

“Take a tree and throw it into the water.”

What is God teaching the Israelites? He is teaching them that the human solutions they would expect are not going to be used by God. He will use divine solutions.

God’s way is the divine way that will teach the Israelites, ultimately, to depend upon His way. In fact, in that solution, we find the only solution to our own grumbling – that God is, ultimately, in control.

Look at verse 27.

Then they came to Elim where there were twelve springs of water and seventy date palms, and they camped there beside the waters.

God is so gracious. He takes the Israelites to the bitter water, where they had their faith tested and they grumble. Then, what does He do? Does He make

them spend a month out there without any water? No, He leads them to an oasis and allows them to refresh themselves and to rest. And they do so for a period of time.

Manna from Heaven . . . and some Quail

Now we come to the second stopover. Look at Exodus, chapter 16, verses 1 and 2.

Then they set out from Elim, and all the congregation of the sons of Israel came to the wilderness of Sin [or Zin], which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after their departure from the land of Egypt. The whole congregation of the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness.

Why was the whole congregation grumbling at Moses and Aaron? Because, basically, they were running out of food. The provision that they had brought with them as they left Egypt had run out. Now they were wondering what in the world they were going to do.

Let me give a few facts so you can understand the enormity of what God is about to do. I read the writings of one expositor who was a mathematician. His calculations have been very helpful to me. He said that if you figure there were two and a half or perhaps, even three million Israelites, it would take, to feed that number of people, four thousand tons of food every day. If you boxed all of that food onto a train, the train would stretch two miles. I got my calculator and soon discovered that this number of people is about five times the current size of our county.

So the people say, “Moses, where are we going to get food? We’ve run out. We’re out in the wilderness and there is no vegetation. What will God do now, Moses?”

God will give them a very interesting solution. Look at verses 11 through 13.

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “I have heard the grumbings of the sons of Israel; speak to them, saying, ‘At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread; and you shall know that I am the Lord your God [Yahweh].’” So it came about at evening that the quails came up and covered the

camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp.

God rains down manna that surfaces when the dew has evaporated. But before He does that, He says, “It has been awhile since you’ve had meat.” and He brings in quail. Another passage of scripture tells that they just went out and collected the quail.

Now before we go any further, let me tell what the scoffers of scripture and those who would try to come up with a natural explanation of this have said. They believe that the manna, this white substance, was the excretion of small desert insects. There is no way Moses is going to talk two and a half million people into eating manna if that is what it is, but that is their solution.

The scoffers believe there has got to be a way around the fact that God just sends stuff out of heaven. The quail, they said, were birds migrating from Africa that became exhausted and were not able to fly more than three feet above the ground.

Now I do not know if you hunt, but that would be the ultimate hunting experience. There is no need for a gun, just get a broom and hit them out of the air. “Great, look at this pile!”

That is a miracle. It is more of a miracle than to just assume that God said He would take care of the people, so He is sending quail and all they have to do is collect it. Every morning for forty years this occurs; every morning for the entire forty years of wandering. Look at verse 35.

The sons of Israel ate the manna forty years, until they came to an inhabited land; they ate the manna until they came to the border of the land of Canaan.

In other words, God is going to provide *tons* of bread every morning. That was His provision. We will look at some of the details later. He is showing the Israelites that He is a powerful God who does not need human solutions to provide for His people. I hope you are noting that as we go along.

Water for the People . . . from a Rock

Now let us go to chapter 17 of Exodus. This is the third grumbling spot. The people are without water this time. Their wineskins are empty. Look at verse 2.

Therefore the people quarreled [grumbled; complained] with Moses and said, “Give us

water that we may drink.” And Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?”

What an ungrateful lot. Skip to verses 5 and 6.

Then the Lord said to Moses, “Pass before the people and take with you some of the elders of Israel; and take in your hand your staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb; and you shall strike the rock, and water will come out of it, that the people may drink.” And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel.

I love this solution better than any of the others.

“Moses, we are thirsty. What will you do?”

Moses says, “Well, this time, just follow me.”

Moses takes his staff and says, “You see that rock over there?”

The people say, “Yeah. It looks a lot like all the other rocks around here.”

He says, “Well, water will come out of that rock.”

“How is that?”

“Stand back and let me get a good swing.”

He strikes the rock and God provides for His people.

Ladies and gentlemen, God is bringing these people down to one basic question. It is the same question that you and I ask when we are at the stopping places where life, like this water, is bitter; where it seems as if we are without provision; where it appears that God is not providing for us. The question is found in verse 7, of chapter 17. Moses comes to the people and they observe this.

He [Moses] named the place Massah and Meribah because of the quarrel of the sons of Israel, and because they tested the Lord, saying, “Is the Lord among us, or not?”

That is the question, “Is the Lord among us, or not?”

That is the bottom line in life. Is God involved in my life? That is the fundamental question that will either make you a grumbler throughout life or a person who trusts in the sovereign power of God. Whatever you may be struggling with, ask the question, “Is God among us? Is He in my home? Is He in my life?”

Therein lies the solution.

Characteristics of Grumblers

Now I want to go back because there is too much in this text to simply skip. Let me give characteristics of grumblers from this scripture. I think you will, with me, find this rather convicting, and also, I hope, life changing.

Observing God’s provision without appreciation

1. The first characteristic is found in chapter 15, verse 25. I would say that the first characteristic of a grumbler is, they observe God’s provision without appreciation or without learning.

In verse 25 of chapter 15, God shows the people a tree; they throw it into the waters and the waters become sweet – and there is no response. There was a response of praise before, but in the next stopping grounds, it is as if they are expecting. They constantly expect and God continually provides, yet there is no sign of appreciation or that they are learning that God is involved.

A grumbler is a very stubborn person. When you and I grumble, we, in effect, blind our eyes to the fact that God is providing what He is providing. We have little appreciation.

Exaggerating personal conditions and complaining

2. The second characteristic is found in chapter 16, verse 3. A grumbler exaggerates personal conditions and then complains.

Note verse 3a of chapter 16.

The sons of Israel said to them [Moses and Aaron], “Would that we had died by the Lord’s hand in the land of Egypt, . . .”

In other words, “Oh, I just wish I had died in Egypt before coming out here.”

Now note what they say, by exaggeration, in verse 3b.

“ . . . when we sat by the pots of meat, when we ate bread to the full; . . .”

They are literally saying, “We ate bread until we were stuffed.”

“ . . . for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”

They have forgotten. They say, “Oh, if we could only go back to the good old days in Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots. We’d eat until we were stuffed.”

Oh, how they have forgotten what it was like in Egypt. They were working from dawn until dusk under heavy taskmasters, who constantly beat them. Forging about and scrounging for food was the lifestyle of a slave.

However, just as with them, it is the same with me when I am grumbling or complaining, I tend to exaggerate all that is bad. Then, after that, I usually look around for someone to blame. They found Moses and complained to him.

Comparing the present to the past

3. Another thing that a grumbler will do, also in chapter 16, verse 3, is compare the present to the past. And I would add, to an always favorable past.

A chronic complainer is constantly looking back, and everything in the background, everything in history, is more favorable than the present. It was always better back then.

I do not like to talk to people who talk about “the good ole days”. Maybe it is because I am too young to have “good ole days”. There are people who could be as young as fifteen or twenty and they remember, “Oh, what it was like before; back then.”

Yet, if you observe children, it is fascinating that they are living for what? Tomorrow. They are continually saying, “I can’t wait until I get old enough to do that. I can’t wait until I grow up and do this. Oh, if I were only sixteen and I could drive. I can’t wait to go to college.”

Children live in the future tense. But at some point, there is a wall that we run into, and from that point on, we say, “Oh, if we could only go back. If we could only return. When I was seven, life was simple. Before I drove, it was much easier.”

A chronic complainer is always comparing the present to a favorable past. The Israelites said, “Oh, we sat by the pots of meat.”

I want to say, “*Wake up!*” – but they are chronic grumblers.

Refusing to totally surrender to the authority of God

4. The fourth characteristic of a grumbler is that they refuse to totally surrender to the authority of God.

There is a root that disallows a grumbler from really experiencing the provision of God. That is why they never appreciate it, because their eyes are, in a sense, closed to what His hand is doing. They are always thinking about the past; they are always exaggerating the present, so they do not really benefit from what God does.

Let me point out an example of this. Look at verse 16 of chapter 16,

This is what the Lord has commanded, “Gather of it every man as much as he should eat; you shall take an omer apiece according to the number of persons each of you has in his tent.”

An omer is about six pints. We can figure that they were picking up about eighteen million pints each morning. Continue to verses 17 and 18.

The sons of Israel did so, and some gathered much and some little. When they measured it with an omer, he who had gathered much had no excess, and he who had gathered little had no lack . . .

This is a supernatural miracle – the manna expands to meet the need of the family or diminishes so they have none left over. Continue to verses 19 and 20.

Moses said to them, “Let no man leave any of it until morning.” But they did not listen to Moses, and some left part of it until morning, and it bred worms and became foul; and Moses was angry with them.

In other words, “Okay, Lord, You’re going to provide manna. But, since I’m really not under Your authority, I’m really not able to appreciate what You’re doing for me. Therefore, I’m not really going to listen to the whole counsel; the whole command. You say, ‘Don’t leave any over night?’ Big deal. I’m going to set a little aside.”

And, of course, God makes sure the leftover spoils.

Skip to verse 26.

Six days you shall gather it, but on the seventh day, the Sabbath [literally, “the rest day”], there will be none.

God says, “Don’t collect manna on the Sabbath.”

Verse 27 tells us,

It came about on the seventh day that some of the people went out to gather, but they found none.

They amaze me. They also resemble me because God says, “Don’t do something, I’m going to take care of you.” and what do I do? “Okay, the seventh day, I’ll go out and get us a portion.”

“Don’t leave any over until morning.”

“Well, I don’t know if God can really provide, so I’ll just make sure I’ve got some saved up.”

This is too convicting! Let us go to the next characteristic.

Distorting reality and falsely accusing

5. Fifthly, grumblers distort reality and falsely accuse.

Look at verse 3 of chapter 17.

But the people thirsted there for water; and they grumbled against Moses and said, “Why, now, have you brought us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?”

Now how intelligent is that? Two and a half million people have reached the conclusion that Moses led them out of Egypt to make sure they die of thirst. That makes a lot of sense since, if they do not have any water, Moses does not have any either.

What are the people doing? They are distorting reality, which goes right along with those who are chronic grumblers.

Grumblers lose the mooring of reality. They are so convinced that God may be against them, that all of this is bad and that all of yesterday was better, that they make foolish decisions. They distort the reality of what is actually happening.

Now let me stop and let us sidle up to Moses for a minute. Let us pretend we are him. How would you and I respond against such a false accusation? What if you were leading the people of Israel and they came to you with this conclusion?

Although this is very dramatic, we have all experienced accusations – some that are true and some that are false. Do we mirror the character of Moses, who repeatedly does the same thing when he is falsely accused?

What does Moses do? He goes to God. You never see, in this text of scripture, Moses saying, “Bring you out to kill you?! Let me give you five reasons why that’s not true.”

Moses never does that. He just goes to God.

Application – Solutions for Grumblers Disease

Let us tie up the strings. How do we overcome, what we could consider, the disease of grumbling? It comes in slowly and then masters us. I want to give just two points. We could talk about twenty; but let me give two.

Developing a constant dependence on the living Lord

1. First, we can overcome grumbling by developing a constant dependence on the living Lord.

Let me point out something that is fascinating. Turn to the gospel of John. You need to see this for yourself.

We talk about types in the Old Testament being fulfilled in the anti-type; that is, Jesus Christ. We have looked at Old Testament passages today, and could preach a sermon about the way Jesus Christ is the anti-type. He fulfills the picture of what happened in the past. In John, chapter 6, this is very clear. Look at verses 32 and 33.

Jesus then said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread out of heaven, but it is My Father who gives you the true bread out of heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down out of heaven, and gives life to the world.”

Skip to verse 35.

Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me will not hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst.”

“I am the manna,” Jesus says.

Look further at verses 48 through 51.

“I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread [“I am the bread”] which comes down out of heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and

the bread also which I will give for the life of the world is My flesh.”

In the wilderness, God provided bread for the people of Israel for forty years, yet they still had to die. Christ said, “I am the bread of life and if you come to depend on Me, you will never die.”

Wow! Yet, that is not all. That is redemption. But there is a constant dependence, throughout our wilderness journey before we have reached the land of promise, where we will overcome the grumbler’s spirit by depending on the Word; the living Bread that is available. It is new each morning.

Let me point out a couple of similarities. It is interesting that the manna fell and was available; the Israelites did not have to go a long distance to find it. In the same way, the word is available to us. Also, the manna was available to those who would go out and collect it. The word is available to those who will go and study it. Manna was never force fed; you could eat it or go hungry. You will never be force fed this Bible; you will choose to eat from it, for it represents the living Word, Jesus Christ, or you will go spiritually hungry.

Let us say that someone comes to you and tells you that they are spiritually weak. You ask them, “How often do you study the Bible?”

They reply, “Well, I read it a couple of times throughout the week and I get a good dose of it on Sunday.”

Now let us say someone comes to you and says they are physically weak. You ask them, “How often do you eat?”

They reply, “Well, I take a bite or two during the week and I have a full meal on Sunday.”

I think spiritual anemia comes, ladies and gentlemen, because you and I are not in the Bible. It is available. We have three or four in our houses; we have many copies. Yet, because it is never force fed, it is ignored.

What a tremendous picture Jesus Christ gives, not only of Himself, but of the word. To overcome grumbling, we should be developing a constant dependence on the living Lord.

Cultivating a thankful attitude

2. The second way to overcome the disease of grumbling is by cultivating a thankful attitude.

I want to give you two ways in which that can happen. Obviously, there are many more. These are related to the wilderness events of the Israelites.

- The first way to cultivate a thankful attitude is to act on a word that occurs more often to the Israelites than to nearly anyone else; that is, the little word “remember”.

I pulled out a concordance and started counting until I gave up. There are probably over three hundred occurrences of the word “remember” in the scriptures. “Remember . . . remember . . . remember . . .” God would tell the Israelites, when they were down in the dumps, “Remember the covenants. Remember the promises.”

The grumbler has forgotten that God is involved. Grumblers, in fact, have very short memories. One of the best solutions is to simply sit down and remember what God has done. I think we need to develop better memories.

- The second way to cultivate a thankful attitude is to practice.

A thankful attitude takes practice. Turn to Colossians, chapter 3, and let me show you. I will read this particular text out of William’s translation because he literalizes the tense of the verb and uses that very word “practice”. Look at verse 15.

Let the peace that Christ can give keep on acting as an umpire in your hearts, for you were called to this state as members of one body; and practice being thankful.

It is interesting that we are told to “practice being thankful.”

Now I have to admit that when I hear the word “practice,” I do not like it because it brings back a certain memory. The word “practice” was always related to the piano – and I hated it. I came from the school where you practiced an hour a day. My parents kept a record and if I missed a practice, they would add it to the next day’s practice time. Many Saturdays, I would practice the piano for five or six hours. That was exciting.

I even ran away from home one day. They said, “Go downstairs and practice. You’ve got four hours to do.”

I climbed out the window and decided, as an eight year old, I was history, as far as that family was concerned. My mother caught up with me a couple of

blocks down the road and I came back and practiced for four hours.

When I hear the word “practice,” I do not think of fun, I think of work. I think that is the context in this verse, “practice being thankful”.

You do not practice thankfulness on the edge of the Red Sea. That does not take practice. It takes practice when you are in the wilderness and things are going wrong; when you are in the desert and you are thirsty. That is when you practice.

We are told to “practice thankfulness.” That means to practice thankfulness when the situations arise that you want to do anything but be thankful. That is the way you develop the discipline of a thankful spirit.

Let me read Colossians, chapter 1, verses 10 through 12, as well.

I want you to lead lives worthy of the Lord to His full satisfaction by bearing fruit in every good enterprise and by a steady growth in a fuller knowledge of God. Then you will be perfectly empowered by His glorious might for every sort of joyous endurance . . .

(that is dealing with circumstances),

. . . and forbearance . . .

(that is dealing with people),

. . . and you will always be thanking the Father who has qualified you to share the lot of His people in the realm of life.

What do I have to be thankful for today? The foundation, the beginning, the starting point is that we, by the redemption of Jesus Christ, can say, “I am thankful that He has qualified me, by His Son, to be part of the family of God.”

I start there. Practice that. When the lights are turned off, begin there. Say, “I am part of God’s family by Jesus Christ. And because of that, I can begin to practice thankfulness; knowing, believing that Jesus Christ is in my life.”

There is a children’s song that I heard someone talking about in relation to this thought. Let me give

the words to you. You may have had your children learn it. It is called, *Grumblers*.

In country, town, or city some people can be found,

Who spend their lives in grumbling at everything around.

Oh yes, they always grumble, no matter what we say,

For these are chronic grumblers and they grumble night and day.

They grumble in the city, they grumble on the farm,

They grumble at their neighbors, they think it is no harm.

They grumble at their husbands, they grumble at their wives,

They grumble at their children, but the grumbler never thrives.

They grumble when it’s raining, they grumble when it’s dry,

And if the crops are failing, they grumble and they sigh.

They grumble at low prices and grumble when they’re high,

They grumble all the year around and they grumble till they die.

Oh, they grumble on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday,

Grumble on Thursday too;

Grumble on Friday, Saturday, Sunday,

Grumble the whole week through.

Grumblers are living life in the past tense. There is no anticipation of what God is going to do in life today and tomorrow. There is no development of that discipline that separates believers from the rest of the world. When the lights are turned off in their lives, where do they go?

We, as believers, have the solution. We go to God and say, “Yes, by the grace of God, *You are in my life.*”

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