

“The Story of Manna: The Problem of Grumbling”—Exodus 16:1-8

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[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, www.welovethegospel.com.]

Take your Bible and let's meet in Exodus 16...

We've come to a famous story in the book of Exodus. As I mentioned last week, it's the second in a sequence of three accounts that highlight Israel's besetting sin—grumbling. Some of the lessons we learned last week from the end of chapter 15 could just as easily have been picked up from chapter 16. The careful reader will experience a sense of déjà vu from one chapter to the next. But the repetition has a purpose.

In the 18th century there was a preacher named George Whitefield whom God used to fan the flames of revival in Britain and the United States. One day a man approached him and asked, “Mr. Whitefield, who do you preach so frequently on the text that says, ‘You must be born again?’” Whitefield had a simple reply: “Because, you must be born again!” In other words, some lessons are so vital that they are worth repeating. When we see the lessons in chapter 15 recapitulated in chapter 16 (and then again in chapter 17), it's safe to say these are lessons that God really wants us to take to heart.

Having said that, I think there are actually three sermons for us in chapter 16. There's a lot of good stuff in this chapter that's worth taking some time to wade through. So let's get after it. When we left off the Israelites were kicking back and feeling refreshed in the oasis of Elim. They had set out from the Red Sea into the wilderness and after a few days they grew thirsty. On the horizon they spotted something to drink in the land of Marah, but the water proved to be bitter and the people began grumbling. God responded by miraculously turning the bitter water sweet. Eventually the Israelites hit the road again only to discover that their grumbling was misguided as they were about to come into Elim, where God was leading them all along, which had an ample supply of refreshing water for all these weary travelers.

But, just like in our lives, the time of refreshing doesn't last forever. As one writer put it,

“The spiritual geography of Israel's exodus from Egypt can be mapped onto the experience of our own souls. Although there are times of refreshing, usually they don't last long. Soon it's time to head back into the desert, which is a place of testing and spiritual growth.”¹

So the Israelites leave behind the waters of Elim and get back on the road toward Mount Sinai. Eventually, in chapter 16, they come to the wilderness of Sin, which is a wonderfully ironic translation in English (though not in Hebrew) because they're about to start sinning again. The cycle repeats itself. On the heels of God's miracles and provisions, the Israelites encounter a challenge, they forget the lessons of yesterday, and the complaining begins again. This time it's not a lack of water that troubles them but a lack of food. Cue the grumbling chorus. I'll begin reading in verse 1 and I encourage you to follow along as I do. This is the Word of God...

“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.’*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.’” (Exodus 16:1-8)

How would you have liked being Moses and Aaron in those days? Verse 2 says “*the whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness.*” Can you imagine? It feels like a bad dream. Wildernesses are difficult enough to travel through without being surrounded by thousands of people who do nothing but complain all the time. And I do mean complain *all the time*. Now imagine forty years of that... I shudder to think.

The Problem of Grumbling

What I would like for us to consider this morning is what these verses teach us about the nature of grumbling. There are three things in particular that we’ll note and it’s important for us to see that they’re not just true of Israel’s complaining. They’re true of yours. They’re true of mine. They are things that all of our complaining tends to have in common. And they’re not pretty. First of all, I want you to notice....

The Absurdity of Our Complaining

One of the things that our complaining usually evidences is this tendency for revisionist history. When we’re not happy with something in the present, we have a tendency to look back on our past with rose-colored glasses, which makes us feel justified in our complaining about the present. Have you noticed that it’s usually people with a reputation for complaining who talk about “the good old days”? The reality is, if we could jump in a time machine and set the clock back, we would probably find that those people complained just as much back then as they do today. “The good old days” didn’t seem so good to them when they were living them out and these rotten days won’t seem as rotten a couple decades removed.

Why do we do that? Because it makes it easier for us to complain. The more contrast we can imagine between what we are experiencing now and what we were experiencing then, the more we can convince ourselves that we have something to complain about. And, frankly, some people like to complain. But if you could take a step back and see it all in hindsight, you’d be forced to acknowledge the absurdity of it all.

Consider how absurd the complaints of the Israelites are. In verse 3 the Israelites complain to Moses and Aaron, “*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.*” Wait, what? Did you hear what they’re claiming? “Moses, when we were in Egypt we had it made in the shade. We had all the meat and bread we ever wanted. It was so awesome.” What? That’s just crazy. They were slaves! Go back and read chapter 2 and see how they were crying out because of the sting of oppression. But they imagine it like they had constant access to some all-you-can-eat buffet. Give them a couple more days in the wilderness and they would probably tell tales of picnics they had with the Pharaoh, where their taskmasters bought them lobster and fine wine... Friends, that’s insane. They weren’t

treated that lavishly in Egypt. They're exaggerating the advantages of their past. That's revisionist history at its finest. And we have such a propensity for this that it doesn't even take long for us to engage in it. All it takes is the right set of circumstances and the desire to complain about them. That combination is enough to transform our memories of the past to as sweet or bitter as we need them to be in order to complain about our present.

But don't misunderstand. I don't think the Israelites consciously know that they're doing this. I think they are sincere. They genuinely believe what they are saying. And they believe it so much, in fact, that they wished that they had died back in Egypt. Patrick Henry famously said, "Give me liberty or give me death!"¹ The Israelites are saying the opposite—"Give us slavery or give us death!"² They are saying that the exodus has actually made their lives worse. They would prefer death by plagues in Egypt than the deliverance that God has wrought. God's rescue seems worse than wrath to them. Wow! That escalated fast. It's laughable. But no one is laughing in the wilderness of Sin. They mean what they say. And the truth is that some of our complaining is just as outrageous, even if we ourselves can't see it yet.

However, we should also notice that the absurdity of complaining is not just seen in the way it views the past, it's also seen in the way it views the present. We tend to complain because we confuse our wants with our needs. In verse 3 they claim to be starving. They accuse their leaders of bringing them into the wilderness "*to kill this whole assembly with hunger.*" Translation: We're so starving we could die at any moment!

Now, turn the page. Look at chapter 17, verse 3—"*the people thirsted there for water, and the people grumbled against Moses and said, 'Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?'*" What I want you to notice here is not that the people are complaining again, but that they mention that their livestock are about to die of thirst. Their livestock. Wait? They have livestock? Where did they come from? Egypt! They have been with them all along the way. So that changes the way you read chapter 16, doesn't it? "Moses, we are going to starve out here! We have nothing to eat!" Meanwhile, the livestock grazes all around them. Nothing to eat? They had milk. They could use it to make cheese. If they had to they could have slaughtered something and eat meat.

They had food. They just didn't have the food they wanted. There's a difference. Psalm 78 seems to confirm this when it refers to the "*food they craved*" (Psalm 78:18, 30). It wasn't that they didn't have the food they needed for their survival. It was that they didn't have the food they craved. Philip Ryken is correct: "They were *not* running out of food, but were confusing what they *wanted* with what they *needed*. This is often the source of our discontent: thinking that our 'greeds' are really our needs."³

Again this highlights the absurdity of their complaining. We do this too though, don't we? If you were to take inventory on your past week's complaints, my guess is that you will find a lot of desires you confused as needs. And when you start elevating your desires to the level of your needs, then you start complaining when you don't have those things. You start doing the adult equivalent to the child writhing on the floor, throwing out words like "starvation" as he complains that there's "nothing to eat" because his mom told him he couldn't have fast food when there's a pantry full of healthy alternatives. Trust me, there's an adult version of that. Some people never grow out of it. All of us, regardless of our age, engage in that behavior from time to time. Probably more than we realize. But why? Because we call our greeds "needs" and the net result is some absurd complaints. But there's an even deeper cause than that, which leads us to...

The Cause of Our Complaining

Imagine that you're in the middle of complaining about something and someone asks you, "Why are you complaining?" What would you say? Chances are you would say I'm complaining because that person did

this, or because my situation looks like that, or because I don't see any solution for the other. But this, that, and the other will have to do with things outside of you. They'll pertain to the people around you or the circumstances that afflict you. *That*, you think, is why you're complaining. But you're wrong.

Robert Louis Stevenson gave us a literary classic called, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. The tale is about a doctor who devises a potion that allows him to accomplish things that he aspires to but lacked the resolve to follow through on. He believes the potion allows him to separate his bad nature from his good nature. But one night when he takes the potion, his bad nature comes out and it proves to be more repulsive than the doctor ever imagined. He describes his evil self like this:

“I knew myself, at the first breath of this new life, to be more wicked, tenfold more wicked, sold a slave to my original evil; and the thought in that moment, braced and delighted me like wine...[Mr. Hyde's] every act and thought centered on self.”

He is called “Edward Hyde,” in part, because that facet of Jekyll's personality was hidden. It was “Hyde-ing” within the good Dr. Jekyll. But, by his own admission, what made him (i.e., Hyde) so repulsive (and simultaneously so intoxicating) was that “every act and thought centered on self.” When we become the center of the universe anything that doesn't align with our hopes or orbit around our person becomes cause for us to complain about. We complain because we are self-centered. We think everything should revolve around us. And because of that self-absorption we develop a sense of entitlement that makes us easily discontented because things don't often go our way. But every so often we get a look at ourselves and sometimes we don't like what we see. Our grumbling selves are not very pretty, even we can admit that, so we start to look for a culprit to lay the blame upon. And that culprit, not surprisingly, always seems to be something outside of our selves—some person or thing or circumstance.

Dr. Jekyll does the same thing. He blames it on the potion. He resolves never to take the potion again and devotes himself to good deeds in an effort to atone for Mr. Hyde's sins and smother out any part of him that still lies dormant underneath. For a while it seems to work. But then one day, as Dr. Jekyll is sitting on a bench in Regents Park, thinking about all the wonderful things he has done and how much better he has lived, despite Mr. Hyde, than the vast majority of mankind. And the book pulls back the curtain and let's us eavesdrop on his inner thoughts...

“I resolved in my future conduct to redeem the past; and I can say with honesty that my resolve was fruitful of some good. You know how earnestly, in these last months of the last year, I labored to relieve suffering; you know that much was done for others... [But as] I smiled, comparing myself to other men, comparing my active goodwill with the lazy cruelty of their neglect...at the very moment of that vain-glorious thought, a qualm came over me, a horrid nausea and the most dreadful shuddering....I looked down.... I was once more Edward Hyde.”⁴

This is the moment that Dr. Jekyll realizes that he needs no potion to become Mr. Hyde. And this is the beginning of the end.

The reason I bring this up is because I think some of us view our complaining selves like Jekyll viewed Hyde. We may acknowledge that in some sense that grumbling person we see in the mirror is a part of us, but it's all too easy to blame the emergence on something outside of us. Like Jekyll, we reason, we just get that way when we drink the “potion.” We complain because this person did this and that person didn't do what we wanted and this series of unfortunate events afflicted us, you know, it's the “potions” fault. But sooner or later (hopefully sooner) we need to realize that we become complainers not because of people or circumstances. We become complainers because of the condition of our heart. We need no potion to make us grumblers. We're already grumblers to the core. We have broken hearts that need a Savior's touch. The potion of our circumstances didn't create our grumbling, it just provided the occasion for our grumbling

hearts to overflow. You have to grasp this. “Our complaints are not caused by our outward circumstances; rather, they reveal the inward condition of our hearts.”⁵

The Bible says, “*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice*” (Philippians 4:4). Did you catch the word “*always*”? You may not be able to rejoice in the people around you or the circumstances that afflict you, but you should *always* be able to rejoice *in the Lord*. Rejoicing, therefore, is not circumstantial. It may be incompatible with grumbling. But it’s not circumstantial. It’s a choice. So if we are characterized by a complaining spirit and we’re looking for someone or something to blame, stop looking out there and start looking in the mirror. There are people who have circumstances a lot worse than yours who aren’t complainers. What does that tell you? It should tell you that you’re the problem. It’s a heart problem. Your heart problem.

The Israelites wanted to locate the source of their complaining in their circumstances. “We’re hungry! We’re starving! We don’t have what we need! It’s your fault Moses! Why did you bring us here!” But they’re barking up the wrong tree and point the finger at the wrong person. Moses wasn’t the problem. Aaron wasn’t the problem. Their own sinful hearts were the problem. Their complaining evidenced a heart problem. So does our complaining.

So what’s wrong with our hearts? The silver lining of our complaining (if we can speak of such a thing) is that our complaining can be a good diagnostic tool. What we complain about tends to reveal our idols. So when we catch ourselves complaining, we should pause and ask ourselves, “Why am I grumbling and complaining about this?” Usually it’s because of some idol. I’m frustrated with my children. “Ah, why does it take you so long to find your shoes every morning? Don’t you know that I have places to go! Why must we always be late because you can’t remember where you took off your shoes every day! Just put them in the same spot every day and we don’t have this problem. Arrgghh! I’m late! Let’s go!”

Why am I complaining in that moment? It’s easy to say, “Well, it’s because of my kids, of course!” Nope. That’s not it. Maybe it’s because my schedule is something of an idol in that moment. My schedule is something that’s important to me. It makes my life better. I think I need it to look a certain way. Something is threatening to take that away from me. Something’s getting in the way of what I’m looking for in order to make life better for me. So since I overvalue that thing (in this case, my schedule) and in that moment I’m treating it as something ultimate (an idol), I grumble. Do you see? What idols does your grumbling bring into view?

But our complaining doesn’t just bring the idols of our heart to the surface, it also helps us to see the unbelief in our heart. I love the way a Scottish pastor named David Strain explains this. He writes, “Dissatisfaction is the flower, the bloom on the head of the weed of unbelief that has been allowed to grow in your heart.” That’s such a beautiful way to describe such an ugly thought. He continues,

“You do not believe, in your particular extremity of need, in your unique circumstances, in all the details of your particular crisis that God can help you, that God can meet your need, that God is enough, that He is sufficient, that He is a full and perfect deliverer, to guide you through, to provide, to sustain, to direct. . . . Where have we allowed a creeping unbelief to slip into our thinking, generating in our hearts fear and fueling discontent? Where are there persistent whispered insinuations that here in this place at this point—God is not enough, that He will not supply, that His promises do not cover your need, that there is no help for your trial, that the nitty-gritty of your day by day burdens are beneath His notice? Have you been tempted to think that way? . . . He’s calling you to repentance for the sin of unbelief, for having allowed the weed of unbelief, not believing His promises, to have grown and festered in your heart and begun to bear fruit in discontentment and a complaining spirit.”⁶

Amen. The Israelites were complaining because there was unbelief in their hearts. Our complaining is no different. Perhaps then we are ready now to receive the final truth from our text...

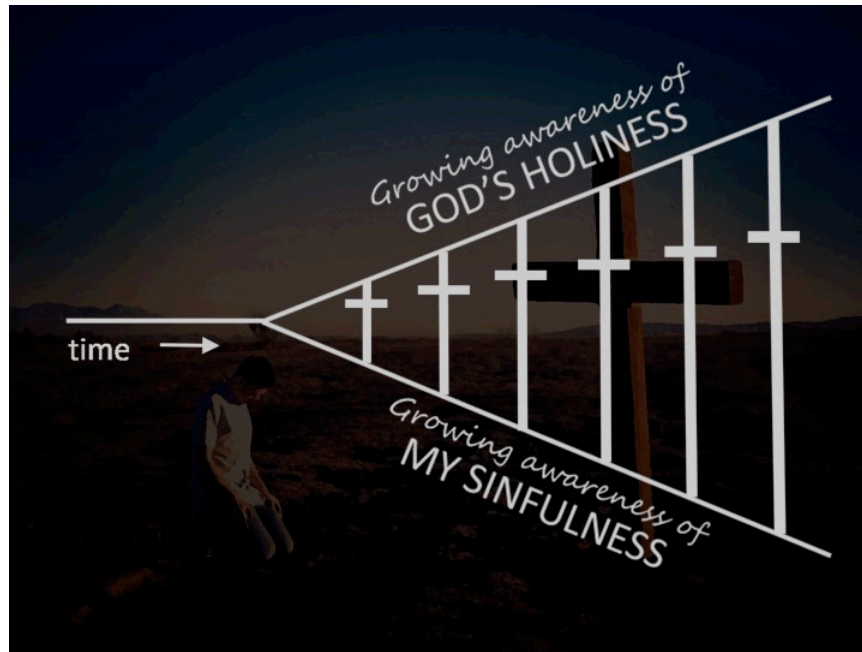
The Object of Our Complaining

They are directing their complaining at Moses and Aaron (Exodus 16:2). That was their target audience. They've gone as far as to accuse their leaders who have dedicated their lives to the congregation of Israel of attempted homicide, or genocide (16:3). But whether they realized it or not, the Israelites were actually complaining against God. At the very least, Moses and Aaron recognized this. They tell the people, in verses 7, that God has "*heard your grumbling against the LORD.*" And then, in verse 8, they say to Israel, "*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.*" Do you see? Even though they were complaining *at* Moses and Aaron, they were in reality complaining against the Lord. Their mumbling against Moses and Aaron was mutiny against God.⁷ In the words of Psalm 78, they were "*rebell[ing] in the desert against the Most High*" (Psalm 78:17). Ryken hits the nail on the head again:

“We need to be honest about the fact that all of our dissatisfaction is discontent with God. Usually we take out our frustrations on someone else. But God knows that when we grumble, we are finding fault with him. A complaining spirit indicates a problem in our relationship with God.”⁸

When the Israelites were saying they wished they had died in Egypt they are essentially saying that they wished God had never saved them. They are maligning God and His salvation in all their murmuring. It was God who led them by the pillar of cloud and fire to this point in the wilderness. God who brought them to this stage in their journey. God was responsible for these circumstances they are whining about. God had been leading them. They're in the wilderness because it was part of God's plan for them. So their complaining about their situation is complaining against the God who put them there. They're finding fault with God, complaining about what He has or has not provided even if His name never crosses their lips. That's what their complaining is doing. That's what is ultimately so disgusting about *our* complaining. And this is why God has every right to take complaining personally.

So my guess is that you're feeling a lot of conviction today (at least those of you with a pulse). Me too. It's tough to see the Mr. Hyde of your heart and it's challenging to realize that even something as common and tolerated as complaining is indicative of serious heart problem and an affront to God Himself. As you mature as a Christian you have moments like this where God's Word pries another layer of your heart back and you see that the roots of sin in your life run deeper than you realized or even imagined possible. Remember this diagram?



When we become Christians we have an awareness of our sinfulness, an awareness of God's holiness, an awareness of the gap that exists between us as a result, and an understanding that God bridges the gap through the cross of Christ. Because Jesus died for our sins, in our place, on the cross we are forgiven our sin through faith in Christ. His cross and His resurrection, in other words, His work alone, makes us right with God, makes us holy in God's sight. That's the good news we call "the Gospel." God saves us through the person and work of Christ. So we love the Gospel.

But as time moves along and we mature in Christ, our awareness of God's holiness increases and our awareness of our sinfulness also increases. We begin to realize that the gap between the two is much larger than we ever imagined. Even something so tolerated as our complaining begins to look so appalling and worthy of judgment. But, if we understand the Gospel, then the conviction shouldn't lead us to settle under the oppressive weight of guilt and shame. It should lead us to repentance. It should lead us anew to the foot of the empty cross, to the throne of the risen Savior, to the tomb that remain vacant, and we believe the Gospel. Our love for Jesus grows. The importance and beauty of the cross increases in our mind. The bigger gap between God's holiness and our sinfulness that we see leads us to worship as we marvel at the love of God that made a way for sinners like us. And our love for the Gospel and the God of the Gospel grows even bigger.

So our conviction should lead us down the path of repentance, along the narrow road of the Gospel, in to the joy of faith and the song of worship. What an amazing God who loves and saves a wretch like me! What an amazing Savior we have in Christ Jesus, who saves me from sins I've yet to even see in my soul to this day. What greater love is there than the one we see in this Jesus? That's the song I'm going to keep on singing. And that's the only song that breaks the shackles of a grumbling spirit. God help us.

Let's pray...

¹ Philip Ryken, “Grumble, Grumble” in *ESV Men’s Devotional Bible* Men’s Devotional Bible (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005), 83.

² Philip Ryken, *Exodus: Saved for God’s Glory* (PTW; Wheaton: Crossway, 2005), 425.

³ Ryken, “Grumble, Grumble,” 83.

⁴ Quoted by Timothy Keller in *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008), 181-182.

⁵ Ryken, “Grumble, Grumble,” 83.

⁶ From a sermon by David Strain, called, “Bread from Heaven – Part 1,” preached on March 22, 2015, to First Presbyterian Church of Jackson, Mississippi.

⁷ Ryken, *Exodus*, 425.

⁸ Ryken, “Grumble, Grumble,” 83.