

Grace for Grumps

Exodus 16:1-36

We can all be unthankful at times. As a result, we can do a lot of griping and complaining. The Israelites were no different. They had a track record of grumbling and complaining. We know that God strictly prohibits such attitudes and actions (Philippians 2:15; James 5:9). And we see in the Bible that God punishes His people for continual ingratitude (Numbers 16:21,35; 21:4-9). Yet our passage shows us that our good God gives grace to His people *in spite of* their grumpiness.

Let's look together at the Word of God and see:

1. The Grumps
2. God's Grace
3. Our Gratitude

1. The Grumps

The Israelites quickly developed a reputation for being grumps with round after round of griping and complaining. This **first round** began a few days after God delivered them from slavery in Egypt. **Exodus 14:10-12** says, ¹⁰ *And when Pharaoh drew near, the children of Israel lifted their eyes, and behold, the Egyptians marched after them. So they were very afraid, and the children of Israel cried out to the LORD.* ¹¹ *Then they said to Moses, "Because there were no graves in Egypt, have you taken us away to die in the wilderness? Why have you so dealt with us, to bring us up out of Egypt?"* ¹² *"Is this not the word that we told you in Egypt, saying, 'Let us alone that we may serve the Egyptians?' For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than that we should die in the wilderness."* How did God respond? He miraculously delivered His people by parting the waters of the Red Sea.

Exodus 15:24 tells us of the **second episode** of grumbling and complaining. After three days of travelling, the Israelites are threatened with dehydration and *"complained against Moses, saying, 'What shall we drink?'"* What was God's response? He instructed Moses to chop down a tree and cast it into the water, and the bitter, brackish water instantly and miraculously became sweet and drinkable.

Turn to next chapter (chp.16) in story of the Israelite's journey and we see that six weeks later they are grumbling and complaining yet again. **Exodus 16:2** presents a **third episode**. *"Then the whole congregation of the children of Israel complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness."* The picture that emerges as we read about the Israelites and their journey through the wilderness is that they are a bunch of whiners and complainers.

Isn't that a picture of the way we can sometimes be? What kind of things do you find yourself grumbling about? What causes you to complain? It's important that we do some self-reflection. We also need to ask: What happens when we are full of complaints? One of the things it can cause us to do is to idealize the past. "Oh, the good old days when ..." If we are content with our present circumstances, it's not necessarily wrong to reflect back on "the good old days." However, the Israelites are looking back in an exceedingly sinful way. In **verse 3** they say, *"Oh, that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat and when we ate bread to the full! For you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."*

Harboring bitterness in our hearts causes us to look at everything in a distorted way. Have you ever put a pair of those crazy glasses on, the ones with thick, coke-bottle-like lenses that cause everything you look at to appear distorted? Some things look really big. Other things look really small. It's like the Israelites had crazy glasses on. These glasses distorted their perspective of the past. All the suffering they experienced while serving as slaves in Egypt seemed really small and insignificant such that you could hardly see or remember it. It was almost out of view. But their crazy glasses put Egypt's food in the forefront of their focus, and made that food look really good. If you think their complaints are badly exaggerated here, look how it progresses when they are a little further along on their journey. In **Numbers 11:5-6** they issued forth this complaint: *"5 We remember the fish which we ate freely in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; 6 but now our whole being is dried up; there is nothing at all except this manna before our eyes!"* The way they were talking, it's like Pharaoh offered them a daily buffet that they could help themselves to!

Is it true? Did they really have it that good in Egypt? No! They were slaves. They were treated harshly. True, whatever food they ate was free. But so was their service to Pharaoh—they didn't get paid a dime! The only payment they got was an occasional lashing and a daily dose of food and water. How, then, can they say they were better off in Egypt? Only because they were looking back through the distorted lens of the grumpy glasses that they were wearing.

Enough about the Israelites. Let's look at our own hearts. What kind of attitude is dominating your heart lately? A thankful, contented spirit? Or a grumpy, complaint-filled spirit? Maybe you are not so quick to verbalize your complaints. Perhaps you just focus on the negative: the things you do not have that you want to have; or the things you do have that you don't want to have. Or maybe you are someone who expresses a complaint with the subtlety of a sign. But that too can be sinful. That's why in one of our hymns we sing, "*Spirit of God, dwell Thou within my heart ...to check [ie. stop] the rising doubt, the rebel sigh*" (TPH #393:4).

We need to see the seriousness of grumbling and complaining for what it is. And we will do so only when we realize that every complaint we utter, whether vocalized or not, is ultimately a complaint against God Himself. Moses tells the Israelites just that in **verses 7-8**: "*[The LORD] hears your complaints against the LORD. But what are we, that you complain against us?*"⁸ Also Moses said, "... for the LORD hears your complaints which you make against Him. And what are we? Your complaints are not against us but against the LORD." " Our grumbling and complaining is always, at bottom, an accusation directed against the LORD. It's a declaration that God is not good enough, that He doesn't have our best interests in mind, or that we deserve more or better from Him than He in His infinite love, wisdom, mercy and grace has chosen to give us. We do well to remind ourselves of the truth expressed in the **Canons of Dort 3-4.15**: "*God does not owe this grace to anyone. For what could God owe to one who has nthg. to give that can be paid back? Indeed, what could God owe to one who has nthg. of his own to give but sin & falsehood?*"

Ultimately, to complain is to rebel against God. We do this on an individual level every time we complain. The Israelites were doing this on a communal level in the wilderness. **Verse 2** says, "*Then the whole congregation of the children of Israel complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness.*" This was full-blown rebellion. **Psalm 78:17-22** is a Spirit-inspired commentary: "*17 But they sinned even more against [the LORD] by rebelling against the Most High in the wilderness. 18 And they tested God in their heart by asking for the food of their fancy.... 22 ... they did not believe in God, and did not trust in His salvation.*" They were so disgruntled that they wished they had died in Egypt instead (v.3).

You might think, "That's terrible! They didn't want the LORD's salvation. Instead, they wanted to be back under the tyrannical rule of Lord Pharaoh. How absurd!" Terrible indeed! But that's where grumbling and complaining will ultimately lead us: to reject the LORD who loves us and follow the dark lord Satan instead.

What is amazing, though, is God's response to this group of chronic grumblers. Verse 3 tells us the Israelites had just finished a third round of grumbling that culminated with accusing Moses and Aaron of having a sinister plan to kill them in the desert by starving them to death. How does God respond? Look at **verse 4**. "*Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you.*"

2. God's Grace

What grace! What infinite patience! What undeserved mercy and grace. There is not an ounce of anything commendable to be seen in their words or actions. They don't offer any prayers or pleas for help. What do they offer up to God? Complaint after complaint after complaint (vss.2, 7, 8, 9, 12). And how does God respond? With an immediate, unconditional, un-called-for response of grace. God doesn't say, "I'll send a light misting," or "Here's a few sparse patches of manna." No. He says, "I'll rain down manna from heaven for you" (v.4). Every morning there would be a fresh layer of manna on the ground. And despite the fact that they would soon start complaining about this new gracious provision (Numbers 21:5), God would graciously keep providing for His people by sending them this manna every morning for the next forty years until they reached the borders of the promised land (v.35; cf. Joshua 5:12).

That familiarizes us with the origin of God's grace of manna. We must also consider the significance of the manna. There are *two things* about the gracious gift of manna that make it so important: *first*, it is a **discipleship tool** that would teach God's people to trust Him, and *second*—and most importantly—it is a **picture of Jesus**.

To see how the manna was a **discipleship tool**, we need to remember that the Israelites were in the wilderness when they received this gracious gift. There was no food or water worth speaking of. Their survival depended solely upon whether or not manna would descend upon the desert floor overnight while they slept. This means the Israelites had to trust God to give them bread for the next day. To ensure that they had to trust Him on a daily basis, God set forth regulations limiting the amount of manna they could collect (v.16 – 1 omer/person = ~ 2L/person) and the length of time they could keep it (v.19 – consume what they had collected on the day they collected it). The discipleship lesson was: depend on God daily!

The manna also taught the Israelites about the importance of Sabbath observance. They were not permitted to collect manna on the Sabbath day as it was to be a day of rest and worship. Thus they had to think and work ahead by collected twice as much food on the sixth day of the week so that they would have enough for the Sabbath day (Exo.16:5,22-30). God was teaching His people to develop this holy habit of weekly worship and rest, and He was training them to trust Him to provide when they stopped working one day a week. (Note: Sabbath observance is in practice prior to being enshrined in law as the 4th commandment.)

The manna was also a **picture of Jesus** and the salvation that would come through His Person and work. How so? The manna is repeatedly referred to as ‘bread’ (v.3-4, 8, 12, 15, 22, 29, 32). Jesus also refers to Himself as bread: “*I am the Bread of Life*” (**John 6:48f**). Also note the difference in the direction that an ordinary loaf of bread comes from and the direction that the extraordinary bread of manna came from. An ordinary loaf of bread comes from the ground up. You plant a kernel of wheat in the ground, it germinates, shoots a stalk up from the dirt up into the air. And once the head is full of ripened kernels, the wheat is harvested, ground into flour, and shaped and baked into a loaf of bread. But manna-bread comes from a totally different direction. It’s bread that ‘grows’ from the top-down. It descends from heaven. That’s why **Psalm 78:25** speaks of manna as the ‘*bread of angels*’ and why Jesus calls it the ‘*bread of heaven*’ which ‘*comes down from heaven*’ (**John 4:50-51**). But Jesus clearly states that the manna that the Israelites ate is not enough. Everyone who ate that manna still died eventually. Not from starvation, but from old age. After pointing out the limitations of the manna, He points to Himself, saying, “*This is the Bread which comes down from heaven, that one may eat of it and not die. I am the Living Bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, He will live forever*” (**John 4:49-51a**). Then, in the last part of verse 51 Jesus is explicit. He says, “*The bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world*” (**John 6:51b**).

That is our greatest need. The spiritual manna, the spiritual food of Jesus’ flesh offered on the cross as a sacrifice for our sin. On account of our sin, whether it be grumbling and complaining or any other sin, we deserve eternal death. But the gospel (good news) is that Jesus freely offers Himself to us again each day. Are you eating of Jesus by trusting in Him as the Bread of Life? If not, then your physical death will be the doorway to your eternal death in hell. **John 6:53** says, “*I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you.*” However, if you are eating of Jesus’ body as your spiritual bread, then Jesus promises that you will not experience eternal death but enjoy eternal life. “⁵¹ *I am the Living Bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread ...* ^{54b} *I will raise him up at the last day & he will live forever.*” (**John 6:50-51,54**).

Whether we are talking about the people of God in the Old and New Testament times or you and I as the people of God today, we are all guilty of ongoing sin in our lives, one of them being lack of contentment that is often expressed in grumbling and complaining. How does God respond to us? With grace again and again. But we must also ask: How will we respond to God? Will we grumble more that grace may abound? No! The Apostle Paul has this story of Israel’s life, along with others, in mind when he writes, “*Do not grumble as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel*” (**1Cor.10:10**). And he tells us that these stories are recorded for us to *warn us about what not to do*, and how not to respond to God in our journey through life (**v.6**). If we are grumps who have received God’s grace, what should we do?

3. Our Gratitude

We should respond with humble, heartfelt gratitude. We should be left speechless and awed at the un-called-for love God shows to us in the face of our utter unworthiness. And we should be moved to gratitude. “Wow, LORD. You love a grumbler and a complainer, a sinner like me! How gracious! How good! There is no God like You!” And we should maintain this attitude of thankfulness *in all circumstances*. The Apostle Paul urges us to “*Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus*” (**1Thess.5:16-18**).

Does this mean that we always thank God for everything and never cry out to Him for anything? No! There is a vast difference between sinful complaining and a sanctified complaint (ex. Psalm 142). The posture of our heart is key. Are we approaching God with a clenched fist and an accusatory tone? Or are we calling out to God with open hands and pleading tones? The difference is a matter of counter-productive complaining to other people versus the productive work of expressing concern to God. He can do something about our problems, so we can be busy with the sanctified complaining of bringing our concerns to God. Concern leads us to act to help others and leads us to ask God for help and sustaining grace.

But what do you do when you fall back into sinful complaining? Come to Jesus! Eat the manna of His grace by confessing your sin and receiving His forgiveness. To everyone who is truly repentant and believing, it is available in fresh supply. And just as God commanded the Israelites to preserve a portion of manna in a jar so that they could remember the manna of God’s grace once they were in the Promised Land (v.32-34), so God commands us to remember Jesus, the Bread of Life, be celebrating the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper which memorializes His flesh offered to God on our behalf on the cross (Luke 22:19; 1Cor.11:24-26).