

## The Bread of Life – Exodus 16:1-21

“The problem is this: I have such a fantastic life that I feel an overwhelming sense of gratitude for it; I am fortunate beyond words. But I don’t have anyone to express my gratitude to. This is a void deep inside me, a void of wanting someone to thank, and I don’t see any plausible way of filling it.”<sup>1</sup> These candid words are from a recent book by Bart Ehrman, a professor of New Testament at UNC-CH, a staunch critic of the Bible, and a self-proclaimed agnostic.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we don’t share Dr. Ehrman’s problem, do we? Our problem is not the issue of knowing to Whom we ought to give thanks. Every breath we take, every beat of our hearts, every morning we awake, our mouths ought to give thanks to our glorious Savior, who died for us on the cross, in our place for our sins, and who rose again from the dead for our justification, and who saved us by His grace, not by anything we had done, and who rules and reigns in heaven on our behalf, and who works all things together for our good and His glory, and who will one day return for us that we might be with Him forever. We know the One to whom we ought to give thanks: His name is Jesus.

But our problem is that too often, even in light of these glorious blessings, we fail to give thanks and we grumble and complain and murmur against Him. When we go through times of difficulty and stress and testing, too often we fail to trust that God will provide for us, that God will keep His promises to us, and we give in to the temptation of grumbling.

This temptation is nothing new for God’s people, as well shall see this morning, as we continue in our study of the life of Moses: our aim is to see that while Moses was great; Jesus is better.

We pick up the story this morning in Exodus 16. God has rescued His people Israel from Egypt and we find them on their way to serve God at Mount Sinai just as God has promised. But before they reach Sinai, God begins to give His people a series of tests... to prove their faith, their trust, and their obedience. If you look at 15:22-27, we see that just *three days* after seeing God part the Red Sea, Israel began to grumble and complain to Moses because they had found no water to drink. God graciously provided His people with water by turning the bitter springs sweet. And in the second half of Verse 25, God says that He “tested” Israel. This was a divine test: God tested and Israel failed.

We see this same pattern occur in Exodus 16: a crisis occurs: this time it is a lack of food rather than a lack of water. God promises to provide for His people and He calls this a “test” in 16:4. God tests us so that we might trust in Him and not in ourselves. We are a forgetful people and we must be taught repeatedly to look to God as our ultimate treasure.

**Thesis:** God tests His people so that we might trust and treasure Him above all things.

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<sup>1</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *God’s Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 128.

## 1. The Grumbling of God's People (16:1-12)

According to Verse 1, the congregation of Israel arrived in a place called the wilderness of Sin (related to the word 'Sinai'). They had been travelling in the wilderness for exactly one month and apparently their food supply had run out because in 16:2-3 the people begin to complain about their hunger.

Notice, that it isn't just one or two Israelites who complain. We see in 16:2 that the "whole" congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron. We don't know the exact number but picture this in your mind: imagine being in a hot desert, with over 1 million sinners, with no food, and everybody is complaining and grumbling. Not a pretty picture.

This attitude of complaining and grumbling would mark Israel throughout the journey from the Red Sea to Mount Sinai. In chapters 15-19 alone, the noun and verb forms of the word grumble/grumbling are used 11 times!

Notice the content of their complaint? (cf. 16:3) Notice that grumbling causes us to forget God's past mercies. Just one month earlier, the people of Israel were praising God Almighty for His saving mercies at the Red Sea: 15:6 "Your right hand, O LORD, glorious in power, your right hand, O LORD, shatters the enemy." And now, they're complaining and grumbling to the point that they wish that they "had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt" (16:3). Instead of remembering God's past mercies and trusting that He could provide for them, Israel grumbles and says: "If only God would have killed us by His own hand in Egypt along with Pharaoh and His army."

Look at 16:3 again: When the people of Israel reflect upon their days in the land of Egypt what do they remember? What do they remember? Verse 3: "pots of meat and bread to the full." Over in Numbers 11:5, we read that "the people of Israel wept again and said, 'Oh that we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic.'"

They don't remember that they suffered in Egypt, that house of slavery, for 400 years. They don't remember the tyranny of life under Pharaoh. They don't remember the harsh conditions and the oppression and the cruelty of their captors. And above all, they don't remember the amazing mercy of God in saving them, and redeeming them, and delivering them from all of this! They have forgotten all God's past mercies.

App: What about you? Each of us was tested this week... whether at our jobs, or in our homes, in our families? How did you respond? Did you remember God's mercies and give Him thanks? Or did you give way to grumbling instead? What mercies have you forgotten this week?

You might be saying: "Is grumbling really such a big deal? After all the grumbling was directed at Moses and Aaron, and not God, right?"

Grumbling is a sin against God. (cf. 16:7-8) The grumbling of the people against Moses and Aaron is really grumbling against God. The people were targeting their leaders Moses and Aaron. But Moses and Aaron were wise enough to see that this grumbling was ultimately an indictment upon God because it was God who had brought Israel out of the land of Egypt and into the wilderness. God is sovereign over all the circumstances of our lives. So ultimately, grumbling is a sin against God.

Think about this: All of your complaints, all of your grumbings... against your boss... against your children... against your girlfriend... against your parents... they were ultimately directed against God. Anytime we murmur... about a person, or a circumstance... we are murmuring against the Almighty. Every time you grumble out of your mouth, it's as if you were waltzing into heaven and tossing your complaints down right before the very throne of God, right at His feet. By grumbling we doubt God's goodness, mistrust His wisdom, and usurp His sovereignty.

Compare this attitude of grumbling with the attitude of child-like trust described in the first question of the Heidelberg Catechism that asks: "What is your only comfort in life and death?"

That I am not my own, but belong with body and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with His precious blood, and has set me free from all the power of the devil. He also preserves me in such a way that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, all things must work together for my salvation. Therefore, by His Holy Spirit He also assures me of eternal life and makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for Him.<sup>2</sup>

Grumbling is a sin that's rooted in unbelief. The people of Israel had already seen God do amazing signs and wonders in saving them and protecting and providing for them. The people of Israel should have trusted that God would provide for their needs. And yet, instead of trusting and treasuring God... their hearts went astray and they did not believe in Him. The fruit of that unbelief was their grumbling and complaining. Grumbling is a symptom of a far greater problem: A problem of the heart problem.

I was born and raised right outside Washington, DC. And for the first year of my life I was not a happy baby. My parents knew that something was wrong with me because I was crying nearly all the time. I'm so thankful for my Mom and Dad because they took me to doctor after doctor to find out what was wrong... and finally a specialist at Georgetown University Medical Center determined that I had a serious heart condition, a birth defect, that required immediate open heart surgery or I was going to die. So on January 20, 1980, on my 1<sup>st</sup> birthday, God spared my life and the doctors were able to fix my heart problem.

When the biblical writers look back on Exodus 16, they diagnose a heart problem that is rooted in unbelief. Listen to Ps 78:17ff "Israel rebelled against the Most High in the desert. They tested God in their heart by demanding the food they craved. They spoke against God, saying, "Can

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<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.wts.edu/resources/heidelberg.html#1>.

God spread a table in the wilderness?" ... So God commanded the skies above and opened the doors of heaven, <sup>24</sup> and he rained down on them manna to eat and gave them the grain of heaven. <sup>25</sup> Man ate of the bread of the angels; he sent them food in abundance. <sup>26</sup> He caused the east wind to blow in the heavens, and by his power he led out the south wind; <sup>27</sup> he rained meat on them like dust, winged birds like the sand of the seas; <sup>28</sup> he let them fall in the midst of their camp, all around their dwellings. <sup>29</sup> And they ate and were well filled, for he gave them what they craved. <sup>32</sup> In spite of all this, they still sinned; despite his wonders, they did not believe."

When the writer of Hebrews is reviewing the heroes of the faith in Hebrews 11, he skips the entire "wilderness generation" and picks up with the story of Israel conquering the city of Jericho:

**Hebrews 11:27-30** <sup>27</sup> By faith he left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king, for he endured as seeing him who is invisible. <sup>28</sup> By faith he kept the Passover and sprinkled the blood, so that the Destroyer of the firstborn might not touch them. <sup>29</sup> By faith the people crossed the Red Sea as on dry land, but the Egyptians, when they attempted to do the same, were drowned. <sup>30</sup> By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days.

The writer looks at this period in the life of Israel and sees a people who walked in unbelief for the 40 years while they wandered in the desert. The fruit of this unbelief was their constant grumbling against God and against Moses. Grumbling in our mouths reveals unbelief in our hearts. This passage of Scripture is not about a lack of food: it's about a lack of faith. When we grumble about our circumstances or about other people or about our problems, we are saying to God: "I deserve better than this."

There is only one person who has ever lived who could honestly and truthfully say: "I deserve better than this." Jesus. And yet... Jesus never grumbled against God. Not once. During His entire early life and ministry, Jesus was mistreated, and marginalized, and persecuted, and oppressed, and afflicted. He was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And yet... He never grumbled against God, His heavenly Father. During His final hours, Jesus was betrayed, and abandoned, and beaten, and mocked, and spat upon, and falsely accused, and tried and condemned as a criminal... and before the high priest and Pontius Pilate... Jesus did not open His mouth! "Like a lamb led away to the slaughter and like a sheep silent before its shearers, so He did not open His mouth." (Isa. 53:7).

Why was Jesus silent? Jesus was silent because of every grumbling and complaining word that has proceeded from your mouth and mine! Jesus "committed no sin, and no deceit was found in His mouth, and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept on entrusting Himself to Him who judges justly." (cf. 1 Pet 2:22-23). Jesus was silent because He was obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Jesus was silent in order to pay the penalty for the sins of your tongue and mine.

If you are not a Christian, know that Jesus promises in Matthew 12:36 that people will have to give an account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. You do not want to face that day with excuses... You want to face that day with a Savior. Turn from your sins and trust in Jesus today.

If you are trusting in Jesus as your Savior this morning: Do you see how Jesus is better than Moses? Jesus isn't just our Example to follow but He's our Savior to adore. Worship Jesus this morning, thanking Him for dying for your sins, especially the sins of grumbling and complaining.

What does this passage have to say to us as a church? We need to pray that we would live this out together as a church so that we make an impact for Christ in Raleigh. In Philippians 2:12-15, Paul commands the church at Philippi, in view of the glorious work of Christ (cf. 2:5-11), to work out or to put into practice the glorious salvation that Christ has secured for them. Paul writes: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, <sup>13</sup> for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure." What is the first explicit thing Paul commands to do? How specifically can a church "work out their salvation"? Look at 2:14: "Do all things without grumbling or questioning, <sup>15</sup> that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world." So one way that Providence can be like a light that shines in Raleigh is to be a church that does not grumble and complain.

So let's repent of our grumbling and as we are being tested by God, instead of grumbling, let's follow Christ by trusting and treasuring Him about all things.

## **2. The Provision of God's Grace (16:13-21)**

God is so gracious to provide for undeserving sinners like Israel and like us. After hearing the people grumble against Him, God still graciously provides bread and meat for them. This food was intended not simply satisfy their physical hunger, but ultimately to fuel their knowledge of God. So God intended this miracle food to fuel their knowledge of the LORD and to display the glory of the LORD. Look at the end of 16:12: God says: '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.'

God provided food because He wanted His people to trust and treasure Him above all things... including food!

What did God provide? God provided bread from heaven called "Manna" which means, appropriately, "what is it?" What is manna? Manna is "What is it" bread. It is sort of described like a heavenly Krispy Kreme! Listen to how Scripture describes it:

16:14: "fine, flake-like thing, fine as frost on the ground."

16:31: "It was like coriander seed, white, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey."

Psalm 78:24-25: "The grain of heaven and the bread of the angels."

We see in 16:17-18, that the people of Israel had an All-You-Can-Eat-Manna-Buffer: “Each of them gathered as much as he could eat.”

Notice that the manna didn’t last over night. The sun melted it and if you tried to store it for the next day (except for the Sabbath) it would become rotten and worm-infested. Apparently they didn’t have Tupperware in the wilderness.

Seriously, why would God set it up this way? God set it up this way in order to cultivate a humble, daily, and faith-filled dependence upon Him. God wanted Israel to go to sleep every night trusting that He would provide for them in the morning. God knew that if He gave them enough manna for 6 months that they wouldn’t think about Him until their manna ran out! God wants His people to pray each morning: “Give us this day our daily bread.”

Notice in 16:35, how long God patiently provided this food for His children. God fed Israel for 40 years! God provided a divinely-catered meal for 40 years! Israel was spoon-fed the food of angels for 16,000 days! God provided manna for Israel until they entered the promised land and celebrated their first Passover in the land of Canaan (cf. Joshua 5:10-12).

I get stressed out feeding my 10-month-old daughter Emmaline and she will eat anything. She gets a little messy, she gets food everywhere, she makes lots of funny noises... but boy is she grateful. It doesn’t really matter what you give her, she is happy to eat it.

But consider the fatherly kindness of God: who lovingly and patiently provides for His children day after day... despite their grumbling and complaining. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 13 that the first thing you must know about love is that “love is patient.”

And throughout these wilderness wanderings, we see God treat Israel like a loving and patient and gracious Father would treat a stubborn, ungrateful, and wayward son. Like a good father, God graciously provides for His children.

Do you see the gracious patience of God of His provision in your life? All true blessing comes to us from a gracious God and not by our own efforts and good works. He is the LORD, the God who merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. (Ex. 34:6)

Why did God provide the manna? Moses provides a divine commentary on our passage in Deuteronomy 8:2-3: “And you shall remember the whole way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. <sup>3</sup> And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.”

You see God gave His people bread from heaven so that we would know that we don’t live on bread... but on God. He wants you and me to trust Him and treasure Him above all things.

So what? God gave manna to Israel thousands of years ago? How does this have anything to do with my life, right now?

Jesus tells you why it matters for your life in John 6. Jesus was a prophet like Moses, and He performed signs and wonders in the midst of Israel. He did miracles and He fed thousands of people with just a few loaves of bread. After performing this sign that was intended to produce faith and trust in Him, the religious leaders questioned Jesus, saying: "What sign do you do? What work do you perform?"

Jesus said to them: John 6:35 "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst..."

Jesus said to them: John 6:40 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."

Jesus said to them: John 6:47-51 <sup>49</sup> Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. <sup>51</sup> 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."

If you are not a Christian, Jesus is saying to you this morning: "Come to me. Turn away from the bread of this world that perishes. Trust and treasure, receive and believe in me, the true bread from heaven, and you will live forever with me."

Remember Providence: Our problem isn't knowing "who" to thank. Our problem is guarding our hearts and our tongues from giving in to grumbling instead of rejoicing with gratitude to our glorious Savior. The only fitting response for all of us who know Jesus, is to praise Him and to live lives worthy of His name... to trust Him in our trials and treasure Him above things.