

Sunday September 18, 2022  
Lesson 3: The Redeemer's Provision  
Scripture: Exodus 17: 1-16

**Context:**

This fall we continue our series titled "Freedom." Our first unit is titled "Rescue" as we look at how God came to save and lead the Israelites to the Promised Land in the Book of Exodus. Today we reflect on how we can appreciate God's means of provision in times of dire need.

The Israelites and their woes against God did not stop with the Egyptian pursuit to the Red Sea. Despite seeing how God consumed the Egyptians with water, they find themselves departing from the Sin desert and set up camp at Rephidim only to find struggles there. Yet it seems the ironic name of the desert where they previously have found themselves has continued to stay with them. Verses one through seven describes an ongoing story we see with the people of God. There are the themes of divine leading, the continuing human complaint, and the unsurpassable graciousness of God, who performs the incredible powers of creation for the Israelites.<sup>1</sup> As the Israelites find themselves in the wilderness, they also find a metaphor for their relationship with God.

At Rephidim, the people begin to complain as they do not see any water readily apparent. Moses explains they are putting God to the test as they complain. Then, the Israelites decide to make things personal: "Why did Moses bring them out of Egypt?" The accusations begin to flood out of them contending how Moses has brought them out there to kill them, their children, and their livestock. Moses relays the message and God tells him to take his staff and alongside the elders, strike a rock. Water flows out and the Israelites thirst no more. The place is renamed Massah/Meribah, poking at Israel for testing God and later referenced in various books such as Deuteronomy and the Psalms.<sup>2</sup> God once again provides for the people amid hardship even as they complain and test God.

Yet the people are not done at Rephidim. The next set of verses, eight through sixteen, recount the Israelites having to face Amalek and his army. The same staff used to bring water to the people is now used as a weapon, but not in the way we might expect. For the first time, we are introduced to Joshua who will lead the troops to fight Amalek and his army.<sup>3</sup> During the battle, when Moses raises his staff, the Israelites prevail. Yet when he lowers, they lose. As a result, Aaron and Hur come to hold him up so he might hold the staff aloft. He does so and the army of Amalek is defeated. God then gives Moses the instruction to build an altar and the place becomes defined as a place where God provides in various ways.

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<sup>1</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, "Exodus," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2010), 187.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

## **Application**

Grumble, grumble, grumble. Have you ever heard that sound before? Beyond how our stomachs make this sound when we are hungry, there's another grumble to come from our lips. Perhaps you've heard it when someone gets exasperated when the store doesn't have the item they need. Or maybe it's the collective grumble when the teacher says there is a pop quiz. Or perhaps it's the murmur in the office breakroom and things are not as everyone would like.

The truth is we've all participated in the "grumble, grumble, grumble" game. Sometimes it might be warranted like the situations named above. It's faint, yet not too much or too loud unless we are all revved up.

Yet grumbling takes a different turn when it comes for no good reason except everyone else is doing it. Thus far in my ministry, I have discovered how like anxiety, grumbling can be contagious. One person starts doing it and then before you know someone else has it. Within a week or two, the grumbling has become a rumbling and the whole congregation is infected. Grumbling which was once benign now becomes a dangerous infection to sweep the body.

The Israelites were the first ones to show us the effects of this group dynamic when they found themselves in the wilderness and for whatever reason, decided God had abandoned them. Forget how God led them out of Egypt and then slew the Egyptians right in front of them. No, the Israelites did not arrive at a place with water in their sight and they let Moses and God know their grumbling wasn't going to stop until someone paid the price.

God could have chosen to remind them of their poor manners, and yet God did not. God instead chose to give them the water and then also help them win a battle. Even during their ingratitude, God chose to bless them and give them provisions.

Time and time again, I think God does the same with us individually and communally. Often, we can become quite good at throwing ourselves pity parties. I know I have done so, grumbling under my breath about various things not going my way. I've heard of others doing the same, sometimes as groups talking about their plights or the oppression they face.

Every now and then, I do not think grumbling is a bad thing. It is life. Yet the danger comes when we think our grumbling somehow means we need to act of our own will because we believe there will not be enough, or our way will not come to fruition. Group grumbling can sometimes lead to poor decision making as people act on feelings instead of thinking or processing what is behind the moaning and groaning.

As we learn in today's scripture, God does not simply abandon persons or groups when things seem scare or bad fortune is looming whether it is a dry well or an enemy marking their next target. God always provides what the people of faith need despite our grumbling and mumbling which gets us nowhere but out of breath. God always provides and gives us what we need to face the future.

I will never forget one season in my life where everything was negative. A person who I respected probed me a little and the talk led me to see they were right about how my grumbling wasn't really doing anything but infecting my soul. My grumbling wasn't healthy, and I was missing out on all the other things God was doing in front of me. From that day on, I started a gratitude journal which went along with my reflections of my daily devotion scripture passages. Sometimes I find one thing to be grateful for while other times I can make an entire list. The spiritual discipline of looking for how God provides even in the wilderness helped me

to see the grumbling was not going to get me anywhere. God had given me what I needed each day. Even when the days or times are hard, God puts various things or people in my life to remind me of God's provision.

I think the same mentality of grumbling for groups can be the same as my individual grumbling. Today I hear a lot of grumbling, especially within my own denomination of the United Methodist Church. People want to complain about what others have done or how others have missed the mark. Perhaps those things are true. And yet what if we as the people of God also told our story and how God has provided us with so much. What if instead of grumbling, we looked to see what God has put in front of us to do as disciples of our Lord. And maybe instead of grumbling and saying we've been abandoned by God or the church, we might name our own story of how God has given us so much to share with others. The church, especially in America, has so many freedoms and resources our brothers and sisters in other places do not possess. May we be a grateful people, praising God for the life we've been given and the opportunity to serve our wonderful God.

How have you seen God provide amid scarcity? Why do you think grumbling is easier than praising or giving thanks? Who are people who hold you accountable when grumbling becomes your default mode of being? What spiritual disciplines can you practice helping you see the abundance of God? Where do you see God blessing and providing for you and your community of faith today?

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