

Sunday May 17, 2020

Lesson 12: God Provides Food in the Wilderness

Scripture: Exodus 16: 2—15

Context:

We continue in our section with grace with a jump from Genesis to Exodus. The book of Exodus narrates the journey of the Israelites out of Egypt. The story is replete with God's grace being extended to a stubborn and hard-hearted people.

The focal lesson today begins as the people leave the Elim oasis in the wilderness and continue on their journey to the Promised Land. They are not far along when the people begin to complain. They move from having a food crisis to a faith crisis.¹ Because they do not have food readily available, they begin to question everything about this move. Talk about the effects of being hungry!

Yet the issue goes further than not receiving one's protein for the day. The people have not yet figured out their new identity. They wish they had stayed in Egypt. As they wandered in the wilderness, they realize they were struggling with where they wanted to die, satiety with oppression is preferred to starvation and freedom.² Their complaining though is not just about reminiscing on the past and being nostalgic. The whining turns deadly as they begin to accuse Moses and Aaron of luring them into the sand dunes to kill them all!

The Lord hears their complaining and whining. Calling Moses to come forward, the Lord promises to send bread from heaven to feed these errant people. There will still be a caveat as the Lord is not going to allow them to think whining and holding God accountable is normal and excusable behavior. Thus, the bread will expire after a certain amount of time. The people are told to stop their grumbling and to watch the ground for these gifts to appear. The Lord will feed them in their physical and spiritual hunger.

It is important to note not to focus upon these as extraordinary or miraculous gifts of God. While the idea of God raining down bread is powerful, the bigger point is to examine how the Israelites missed the ordinary blessings around them.³ The manna described is similar to a natural phenomenon on the Sinai Peninsula. There is a type of plant lice which punctures the fruit of the tamarisk tree and excretes a substance from this juice, a yellowish-white flake or ball which congeals when it is cold and disintegrates in warmer temperatures.⁴ Quail are a common migratory bird blown in from the Mediterranean Sea, usually exhausted enough to be caught by hand.⁵ These would have

¹ Terence E. Fretheim, "Exodus," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2010), 181.

² *Ibid.*, 181.

³ *Ibid.*, 182.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 182.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 182.

been readily available to the people. Thus, the Israelites were provided for in the wilderness.

Application

I think we can all name at least one thing which drove even the mildest of our parents or guardians from a sweet hen into the raging hulk. For my father, someone known for his cool and collected nature, lying and whining were the collective tools to make him become a different person. Woe unto those who continued to complain unto him without being grateful or offering a solution.

Fitting with the theme of parents dealing with whining and complaining children, the Israelites were giving our Lord a hard time. God had delivered them out of slavery and promised to lead them home. They wanted to go back to Egypt because there was soup there. God sent them Moses and Aaron to help lead and encourage them on their journey. They developed conspiracy theories about Moses and Aaron and rebelled against them. The Israelites were the children who liked to hear their own sobs and did not think the word “no” should be in their vocabulary.

Before we become too critical about the Israelites, we might want to take a look in the mirror. We too can excel at whining and complaining even when we are not in the wilderness. Some people take complaining and make it an art slipping in everything they think will receive their attention whether it’s an e-mail or a text message. They find a way to whine about something.

I have found that when people whine or complain, sometimes they are going through a hard time and may need help processing. There is nothing wrong with someone trying to figure things out. There is nothing wrong with lamenting or naming pain.

Yet in today’s lesson the complaining and whining stopped the people from seeing how God had already delivered them and the food was there for the taking. The people completely missed the abundance of God all around them. They were so focused on what had been the past they forgot to look at the present.

For God, the lesson was about providing grace even to ungrateful and unrepentant people. In this story, God does not punish the people for their whining or complaining even though it is tiring. God provides the people with food to feed them and fulfills God’s covenant to provide for God’s people.

Today the world, particularly the United States, has more than enough resources to provide abundantly for all people. And yet at times, people still find things to whine or complain about even in our prosperity. During the pandemic, I’ve heard many people complain and whine about things we have been asked to do to protect ourselves and those around us. We want something different where we can do whatever we want and choose our own paths.

Perhaps we might need to read this story and be reminded how God has given us plenty. Most of us are able to go to the grocery store and take care of our needs even if we have to wear a mask. We may not be able to gather for worship and yet I have seen clergy and lay leaders work tirelessly to provide different worship and mission opportunities for their congregations. Many of us are blessed to have family and neighbors who can help take care of us. Even though we may not be able to travel, are we not blessed to know there are those who love us and there are technological means to help us check in? Even in the wilderness of our lives, God provides for us. It may not be the

way we want or the way those needs have been met in the past and yet they are there.

Where do you see God's abundance around you? Why do you think complaining or whining is easier than being grateful or offering solutions? How can you count the blessings in your life? What is the connection between grace and abundance?

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