



Eyes on Canaan with a Mind in Egypt

The Exodus

Israel's ancestors came to Egypt during a severe drought and famine. At first, they welcomed and given good land for their herds. But a new Pharaoh came along and the Israelites fell out of favor.

They were made slaves.

As their situation deteriorated, they began crying to God for deliverance. God heard their cries and raised up a deliverer – Moses. God sent Moses to Pharaoh, demanding His people be freed. Pharaoh refused. God visited Egypt with a plague or two – to be exact: ten. Finally, Pharaoh got the message and reluctantly allowed Israel to go free.

But a funny thing happened on the way to the Promised Land. The Israelites, despite their outward confidence in God, displayed a nagging tendency to forget what had brought them that far. Even though they were the product of God's great works in the past, they displayed a conspicuous lack of faith in the future.

God lead the Israelites into the desert. You could not miss his guidance. They came to a fork in the road – turn left and you go to the Promised Land in two weeks. So they turn right. They turned right, because God led them there. He put a pillar of cloud in the sky during the day and a pillar of fire at night to show them where to go. As they followed the pillar, they ran into one crisis after another.



Almost immediately, they find themselves trapped – Pharaoh's army behind them and the Red Sea in front. You can imagine them asking a question or two at this point, "God, what on earth are you thinking?" Instead of losing their lives, God parted the Red Sea and they were miraculously delivered while the Egyptian army was drowned.

They took the desert road again. It's hot and they were walking for miles. And they are getting thirstier all the time. They continue to follow God and he brings them to an oasis. You can imagine them saying: "Just in time, God, I don't think I could have taken another step without a drink." But the water is undrinkable. It is bitter. In their disappointment and frustration, they call the place Marah, which means bitter.

And [Moses] cried to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a log, and he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet. There the LORD made for them a statute and a rule, and there he tested them, saying, "If you will diligently listen to the voice of the LORD your God,

and do that which is right in his eyes, and give ear to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, your healer” (Exodus 15:25-26 ESV).

The next stop is Elim. There is great tasting water there. And that’s where the cloud is headed, but Elim is 10 miles away. They trudge through the 110 degree desert heat, where only mad dogs venture into the mid-day sun.

It’s not just thirst they have to deal with now; they also are running out of food.

Amazingly, God feeds them. Yet another miracle. This time he feeds them with manna and quail. It must have been absolutely amazing for the Israelites to have a heavenly meal every day. Of course, by then they were in solid complaining mode: “Why do we have to have it every day? Yesterday it was manna burgers, today its manna soufflé.”

In Exodus 17, we find them thirsty yet again when they get to Rephidim and their grumbling reaches fever pitch. This time they are prepared to stone Moses; they are totally frustrated with God. Amazingly, God again provides water through a remarkable miracle.

One thing is clear. Walking the pilgrim path was not easy. They did not anticipate hardship. In fact, their experiences rather surprised them. They were frightened and began thinking about the “good old days” back in Egypt, when they used to sing and eat. They became discouraged and disgruntled before they had hardly started. Their sentimental longings catapulted them into full complaint mode.

The Hebrew word for grumble¹ made debuts in the desert barely three days after the miraculous deliverance at the Red Sea (Exodus 15:22-24). The second grumbling incident erupted in the middle of the second month (16:1-2). The words “grumbled” (16:2, 7) and “grumbling” (16:7, 8, 8, 8, 9, 12) appear eight times in Exodus 16, more than any chapter in the Bible. Israel became a nation of chronic grumblers.

1. Grumblers Always Find Something to Complain About!

And the whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, 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” (Exodus 16:2-3 ESV).

¹ Except for Joshua 9:18, all occurrences of the Hebrew verb “grumble” are found in six chapters in the Pentateuch: Exodus 15, 16, 17 and Numbers 14, 16, 17.

It seems the children of Israel have learned nothing from their past experience of God's faithfulness. They give in to self-pity, grumbling and complaining. Yet we must admit that, when faced with difficulties and problems we cannot solve, we often give in to complaint.

The truth is some of us make grumbling an art form. We grumble habitually; we do not even stop for Sundays. We grumble if we are caught in slow moving traffic, if our meal at the restaurant is not delivered in a timely manner, if a four-year-old shoestrings breaks ...

2. Grumbling Is a Perception Problem

Israel exaggerated the benefits of Egypt. As slaves it could hardly be true that they "sat" by their meat pots and ate "all they wanted." They forgot about the taskmaster's lash and their deep anguish to be free. They forgot the backbreaking work Pharaoh imposed. Their perception of the imminent danger of starvation was also greatly exaggerated. Already, they forgot the miracle where God made the bitter waters drinkable (Exodus 15:22-24).

The truth is the Israelites were unwanted enemies in Egypt – outsiders and trespassers. The food was never in abundance and the Israelites were only slaves. Israel forgot or minimized the oppression, cruelty, bondage and the death they experienced in Egypt (Exodus 1:11-15).

Grumbling invariably causes us to distort the facts of the past. Solomon warns:

Say not, "Why were the former days better than these?"

For it is not from wisdom that you ask this (Ecclesiastes 7:10 ESV).

We tend to pine for the past we never had, making it impossible to enjoy the present. Nostalgia is an enemy of the present good. Which is the better option: Rejoice in what the Lord gives now or resent the Lord for what we do not have?

3. Grumbling Is Contagious

According to Exodus 16:2, "The whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled..." What had begun with only a few now had contaminated the whole congregation. Just a few weeks before, Moses was their hero, leading them out of Egypt, after four centuries of slavery. Now everyone is mad.

Few things cause a church to bog down quicker than a spirit of complaining. It is amazing how it affects reasonable people and sucks the life out of a congregation.

4. Grumblers Look for Someone to Blame!

“The whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled *against Moses and Aaron*” (Exodus 16:2, emphasis added). They accused Moses of leading them into the wilderness to kill them. They thought they were only venting their frustrations on a man, but in reality they were grumbling against God.

A cartoon showed an irate man at the church exit: “Don’t you offer to shake my hand, preacher, until you’re ready to apologize for not having the sensitivity to know what I’m offended about!”

5. Grumblers Are Never Satisfied with What They Have

They did not have to work for quail or the manna. They did not have to prepare the manna; all they had to do was eat it, but they still did not like it. Numbers 11:5-6, records the feelings of the children of Israel towards this manna:

“We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at (ESV).”

You can almost hear the “yech” in their voices! Even when the people of God are being fed in abundance they grumble. Why? Because the food God provides is not what they would have preferred.

6. Grumbling Betrays a Lack of Faith

Exodus 16:4, 16-20

There was enough manna, more than enough. Yet, many deliberately disobeyed God’s instructions. They hoarded the manna, betraying a lack of trust.

At its heart, grumbling betrays a lack of faith.