

“GOD’S GRACE TO GRUMBLERS”

I. Introduction

- A. After singing about the destruction of their enemies at the Red Sea, the people of Israel may well have thought that their difficulties were at an end.
 - 1. Perhaps they thought that they would go on celebrating until they entered into the Promised Land.
 - 2. The reality was that their difficulties were only beginning.
 - 3. This did not mean that the Lord was no longer with them.
 - 4. God was the one who led them into the trials that they faced in this text.
 - 5. As we will see, he did so in order to expose what was in their hearts.
- B. This passage relates three similar events that took place after the Red Sea deliverance.
 - 1. On three separate occasions, the Israelites found themselves in the wilderness without water or without food.
 - 2. In each instance, they responded to the crisis by grumbling against the Lord.
 - 3. And in each instance, the Lord responded to their grumbling by miraculously meeting their needs.

II. Bitter Water Made Sweet

- A. Three days after singing their praises to God on the banks of the Red Sea, the Israelites found themselves in the wilderness without any water.

1. Imagine their relief when they got to Marah and found some water.
 2. Then imagine their disappointment when they discovered that this water was no good to drink.
 3. The water was “bitter”, which means that it had large percentages of dissolved mineral salts.
 4. Like sea water, such water would be undrinkable.
 5. This presented the people of Israel with a real problem.
 6. They were an entire nation of people, in the wilderness, with no water.
 7. It was a matter of life and death.
- B. God does not expect his people to act as if that our problems are not real.
1. What he expects is for us to cry out to him in our time of need.
 2. Israel’s previous experiences should have taught them to trust that the Lord would provide for them.
 3. How could a lack of water be a problem for the God who had turned the Nile into blood and parted the Red Sea?
 4. How could they doubt that God was with them when the pillar of cloud and fire that led them gave them tangible assurance of his presence?
 5. The Israelites had every reason to trust in the Lord in the face of this crisis, but instead they grumbled against him.
- C. We should not forget that God was the one who led Israel to Marah.

1. He could have brought them to a place where there was good drinking water.
 2. But he brought them to Marah, and he did so for a reason.
 3. As Calvin explains, God “might have given them sweet water to drink at first, but He wished by the bitter to make prominent the bitterness which lurked in their own hearts.”
 4. The bitterness of that water signified the bitterness of sin and its resulting curse.
 5. We can say this in light of in verse 26, where the Lord explains this healing of the water by saying that if the Israelites will listen to him and keep his statutes, he will be their healer.
 6. He will heal them of the bitter consequences of sin.
 7. If they will obey him, he will not bring upon them the diseases that he brought upon the Egyptians as judgment for their sin.
- D. The people did not go to the Lord for help, but Moses did.
1. And God responded to Moses’ cry for help by showing him a log to throw in the water, which caused the water to be healed of its bitterness.
 2. The word “showed” in verse 25 is the same root from which the word *Torah*, the Hebrew word for law, is derived.
 3. This helps us to understand what took place here.
 4. God gave Moses instructions and Moses’ obedience to those instructions resulted in blessing.
 5. Notice the parallel with what God says in verse 26.

6. God tells the people, "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."
 7. This is a conditional promise.
 8. God is saying, 'If you obey, you will be blessed.'
 9. He is saying, 'Do this, and you will live.'
- E. This raises an important question.
1. Is this saying that the way for us to obtain God's blessing is by our performance of his law?
 2. This is how some commentators interpret this verse.
 3. One evangelical commentary that I read this week had this to say about verse 26: "God's blessing is always dependent on the obedience of His children to His revealed will." [Cole, 129]
 4. On the surface, that may sound like a plausible interpretation.
 5. But if this is true, then how are we to explain the things that transpire in this passage?
 6. In all three of the crises that the Israelites face here, they fail to listen to God's voice and obey him.
 7. Nevertheless, in all three instances the Lord pours out his blessings upon his people.
 8. I think that this makes it clear that God gave the conditional promise of verse 26 in order to cause his people to see their need for a Savior.

9. It is true that God's blessings have to be merited, but we are not capable of meriting them in ourselves.
10. They can only be merited for us by Jesus Christ's perfect obedience on our behalf.

III. Bread from Heaven

- A. After enjoying a period of refreshment at the springs of Elim, the Israelites set out again on their journey through the wilderness.
 1. It was not long before their food supplies started to run out.
 2. Once again, they responded to the crisis by grumbling against Moses and Aaron, which was the same thing as grumbling against the Lord, since these men were God's servants.
 3. As the people grumbled, they looked back fondly upon their former life of slavery.
 4. At least they had enough food to eat in Egypt.
 5. Now they were going to die of starvation out in the middle of this wilderness, and Moses and Aaron were to blame.
- B. Once again, the Lord responds to his people's lack of faith with remarkable patience.
 1. Instead of rebuking or condemning them, he tells Moses that he is going to rain down bread from heaven.
 2. On top of that, God manifests his glory to the people, assuring them of his presence with them.
 3. As it says in 16:10, "as soon as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the people of Israel, they looked toward the wilderness, and behold, the glory of the LORD appeared in a cloud."

4. What an astounding picture this is of the kindness and compassion that God has for his people.
 5. He responds to our complaints by meeting our needs and reassuring us that he is with us.
- C. After satisfying the people's hunger with a meal of quail that night, the Lord started providing for their ongoing sustenance by sending the manna the next morning.
1. This miraculous provision was not just a matter of God meeting his people's physical needs.
 2. The Lord was also using this experience to demonstrate how he provides spiritual life for his people.
 3. This is how Jesus interprets the giving of the manna in John 6.
 4. After his miraculous feeding of the five thousand, Jesus told the crowd, "I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. 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... Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." (John 6:48-51, 53)
 5. God's provision of the manna in the wilderness was symbolic of the spiritual life that he pours out upon his people in Christ.
 6. God gave Israel the manna in order to prepare the way for Christ, the true bread that came down from heaven.
 7. Without the manna, the Israelites would have perished in the wilderness.

8. In the same way, without Christ, our souls would perish for all eternity.
 9. We are as dependent upon Jesus for spiritual life as we are dependent upon food for physical life.
- D. God also used the giving of the manna to test his people.
1. He tells Moses in 16:4 that they are to follow his instructions about how to gather the manna “that I may test them.”
 2. The specific instructions that God gave had to do with the observance of the Sabbath.
 3. They were to do their gathering on six days and to rest from gathering on the seventh day.
 4. This is the essence of the fourth commandment.
 5. The Sabbath is a day to cease from doing the work that we do on the other days of the week.
 6. But this does not mean that it is merely a day off.
 7. It is not just the last day of the weekend.
 8. As the passage says, the Sabbath is to be a day of “solemn rest.”
 9. It is to be a “holy Sabbath.”
 10. It is a day that is to be set apart from other days, a day to find refreshing for our souls.
- E. The Sabbath tests our faith.
1. It confronts us with the question of whether we will trust the Lord to provide for us through the work that he gives us to do on the other six days of the week.

2. And as we consider this, we need to remember that God did not give the Sabbath in order to burden us but in order to bless us.
3. The Sabbath is a symbol of the eternal rest that the redeemed will enjoy in God's kingdom.
4. Every Lord's Day is a day to find refreshment and sustenance as we look forward to the day when we will enter into our final rest in the new creation.

IV. Water from the Stricken Rock

- A. This brings us to the third instance of God extending grace to grumblers, which is related in 17:1-7.
 1. As the people continued on their way through the wilderness, they camped at a place called Rephidim.
 2. The name "Rephidim" means 'resting-place.'
 3. Imagine the Israelite's dismay when they discovered that the resting place to which the Lord had led them didn't have any water.
 4. Once again, they responded to their trial in a sinful manner.
 5. Instead of calling out to the Lord for help, they quarreled with Moses.
 6. The Hebrew word that is translated "quarreled" in 17:2 is a word that has judicial connotations.
 7. It sometimes describes bringing a lawsuit against someone.
 8. That was exactly what the people of Israel were doing here.
 9. They were filing a lawsuit against Moses, and, ultimately, a lawsuit against God.

10. They were charging the Lord with abandoning them and leaving them to die in the desert.
 11. As it says in 17:7, "they tested the LORD by saying, 'Is the LORD among us or not?'"
- B. Think about the audacity of this.
1. God had done so much for these people.
 2. He had proven his faithfulness to them time and time again.
 3. He had displayed his power to them in remarkable ways.
 4. He had been so patient with them when they doubted him and grumbled against him.
 5. He had demonstrated that he was able to overcome any lack of water or food.
 6. But in spite of all of this, the people decided that this was the last straw.
 7. They were sick and tired of being brought to places that had no food or water.
 8. This time, God was going to have to answer for what he had done.
- C. Moses understood what was happening here.
1. He realized that the people were bringing a judicial complaint.
 2. This is why he told God that the people were ready to stone him.
 3. He was not exaggerating.

4. Moses was God's representative, and the people were filing a lawsuit against him.
5. They were ready to pronounce him guilty and sentence him to death.

D. How would you expect God to respond to this?

1. Wouldn't you think that he would say that he has had enough of these people?
2. But he doesn't do that.
3. He does something that is utterly astounding.
4. He submits himself to the trial.
5. He instructs Moses to take the elders, the men who served as judges in the community.
6. He tells Moses to take his staff, the staff through which God had executed judgment upon Egypt.
7. And then God says this: "Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink."
8. Do you see what this means?
9. The Lord stood on that rock and allowed the rod of judgment to fall down upon him.
10. God had not done anything wrong.
11. It was the Israelites who had sinned by grumbling against him.
12. Yet he took the punishment that they deserved, and the result was a spring of water to satisfy their thirst.

- E. In doing this, God was foreshadowing what Jesus Christ was going to do for his people on the cross.
1. This is why Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10 that the rock that Moses struck “was Christ.”
 2. As Edmund Clowney explains, “‘Before the face’ of Moses the judge, with his rod uplifted, stands the God of Israel. The Lord stands in the prisoner’s dock... God, the Judge, bears the judgment; He receives the blow that their rebellion deserves.” [*The Unfolding Mystery*, 124, 125]
 3. This shows us how a just and holy God can be gracious to a grumbling people.
 4. It shows us how we can have the Lord as our healer, even though we fail to keep his commandments time and time again.
 5. In spite of our continued failures, God patiently and persistently extends his grace to us because his justice has been satisfied through the substitutionary death of his Son on behalf of all who look to him in faith.