

Provisions for the Promise Exodus 16:8-36

Many of us first heard the Greek poem *The Odyssey* in school. It's partly about a couple who made a promise. Before leaving home for war, Odysseus¹ vowed to his wife Penelope that he would return. But what seemed simple in the speaking proved painful in the keeping. He was delayed by warfare, weather, and temptation. As the story goes, a goddess even offered him immortality if he would but stay with her. For twenty years he was delayed by self and circumstance. And yet, the loving vow he made still gripped him.

Back home, there was tremendous pressure for his wife Penelope to move on with her life and remarry. Suitors came out of the woodwork. Under such pressure, she tells these suitors that she would choose one of them after she finished weaving her husband's burial shroud. So, each night, as she secretly unraveled what she had woven during the day, she kept her own vow. Quietly resisting, waiting, and holding fast to a promise with every passing year.²

It's a compelling classic because it presses on something we all know. Promises are easy to make in moments of clarity, but hard to keep in seasons of delay, pressure, and temptation. Perhaps we admire the kind of faithfulness that will play out in Homer's work referenced, but I'm certain we all feel the strain of its absence in our own lives. We don't just *struggle* to keep promises, but we all have a spotted history of *breaking* them. And why is that? The most obvious reason is that we all possess indwelling sin. We can turn inward at the drop of a dime to serve our own interests. I can easily rub my mind over a few personal scars here. There are other times that keeping our word is made impossible because of things outside of our control. "I promise we'll go to that baseball game on June 7th. See, I've already bought the tickets!" But the migraine sets in. The thunderstorm rolls in. The punctured tire rolls off. The unexpected makes an entrance, unannounced and unwanted. A fallen world means that some of our commitments will fall flat.

Here's what I'm driving us to consider from our text: God never intended to take half-measures with His people. We see this in the promises offered centuries prior which are being reiterated in chapter 6. Some of what Yahweh declared had come to pass. He brought Israel, "*out from under the burdens of the Egyptians...with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment.*"³ But if Exodus 6:8 was to become a reality, "*I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. I will give it to you for a possession,*" then other provisions were absolutely necessary. Saving Israel was not a period, but a comma. If He planned the ends, then Israel was called upon in their time of testing to trust Him with the *means* required to accomplish those ends. Israel would need more than what a bare desert could yield, or what their discontented hearts would deserve.

I. The LORD appeared with awareness

We left off last week with God assuring Israel that they will be given two of the most basic necessities which humans must have to survive—food and drink. And these would not unfold without dramatic displays of God's hand. Undrinkable waters stirred up by a tree, made sweet.

¹ Or Ulysses, the Latinized name.

² Homer's *The Odyssey* (*Penguin Classics*).

³ Exodus 6:6-8

And then the promise of bread arriving each morning among the hundreds of thousands of Israelites. From verse 4 of our chapter, we learn that the LORD would “*rain bread from heaven*” for His people. These were unforgettable deeds indeed.

But as we take a bird’s eye view of Exodus, we see that God has done marvels and wielded His saving arm to show Israel and the nations that there is none like Yahweh. An ongoing temptation for Israel might be to think that God is like the other gods. Our temptation is to downgrade God by thinking that He is like us. One reason that the purpose clause remained on repeat throughout Exodus “*so that you may know that I am the LORD,*” was not only to school a people, who, for hundreds of years, were steeped in polytheism, but to school all who would read His Word for all time. The house of Israel needed and my house needs a constant dose of the doctrine of God; to know that He is a one-of-one Sovereign, the Creator of the universe, and the LORD who mercifully saves the unworthy. This knowledge of God has been the thick thread running through the first fifteen chapters.

But as we weave deeper into chapter 16, we should mark another kind of restoration—not just of the knowledge of God, but of the presence of God among His people and the expectations that are marked by such glorious proximity.⁴ It’s where the rest of the book is headed. And in some ways God’s presence is the first feature of our text today. God’s purpose in bringing Israel into a barren wilderness was to prove their trust in Him. This was a test, and even on the heels of such great mercies by the Red Sea, Israel was hovering in the F- range. They grumbled with discontentment.⁵ Instead of controlling their tongues in faith, or displaying trust through prayer, they voiced their discontent at the way things were developing. And Moses reminded them in verse 8, ***Your grumbings are not against us but against the LORD.***” This was a serious affair. It was treasonous heart-noise that eventually made its rounds among the people. And this sin is never too far away from pouncing out of our own mouths.⁶

James, the half-brother of our Lord Jesus, wrote to believers in a similar context of those suffering and disheartened by their circumstances. We read, “*You...be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. [9] Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door.*”⁷ What does the LORD lead Moses to do in the face of this widespread complaining under difficult circumstances? Verse 9, ***Then Moses said to Aaron, ‘Say to all the congregation of the sons of Israel, ‘Come near before the LORD, for He has heard your grumbings.’***” James appeals to the imminence of the LORD’s presence and Moses brings Israel before the LORD’s presence. The similarity is striking and instructive.

God was aware of Israel’s cries of complaint, and He conveys that they are to ***come near*** as He draws near. Verse 10, ***It came about as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the sons of Israel, that they looked toward the wilderness, and behold, the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud.*** This manifestation was surely meant to captivate Israel with reverence. As they beheld

⁴ Michael Morales, *Exodus Old and New: A Biblical Theology of Redemption*, 39.

⁵ Exodus 15:24, 16:2

⁶ Genesis 4:7

⁷ James 5:8-9

the presence of divine glory, they were to trade in their protests for praises.⁸ But this appearance was to also work in Israel a calming reassurance. He, the God who released their four-and-a-half-century-burden and who appeared before the eyes of all, is the One towering over the dangerous *wilderness*, almost as if to tease out His Lordship over it. No water? No food? Non-issues. He who saved and He who sees is He who has what it takes to sustain.

II. The LORD provided with patience

Beginning in verse 12, Moses was tasked by the LORD to relay the message to Israel in light of their grumblings, *At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread.* And the LORD was true to His Word beginning in verse 13, *So it came about at evening that the quails came up and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp.* For a confused Israel, Moses identifies the substance on the ground by saying, *It is the bread which the LORD has given you to eat.* Perhaps you also notice what's not being expressed—a punishment of any kind. This is nothing short of a double-edged kindness by God, provisions with patience. He withheld the judgment which Israel certainly deserved while simultaneously giving Israel undeserved provisions. This double-edged kindness would continue on as the LORD would establish His covenant with Israel. Paul, preaching in Acts 13, references these moments. Acts 13:18, *“And for about forty years he put up with them in the wilderness.”* This is who the LORD is. Patient. Taking grumblers, offering them more than they could ever ask or imagine, and turning them into people whose tongues are channels of life and God's honor.

One of the provisions God patiently gave was *quail*. A quail is a small bird that people harvest all over the world. They are still prevalent in North Africa and the Middle East, migrating in large numbers along the Mediterranean. Here, this one-evening supply of *quail* in great numbers was an answer from the LORD to Israel's cry for meat back in verse 3. The LORD is making a gracious concession to show them He is indeed a forbearing LORD who is trustworthy for all their needs. At another time in the future, quail will be a form of punishment for Israel, but here we find it as a merciful provision.⁹

The mainstay of their diet going forward, however, would be bread, which Israel would come to call *manna*. Its description of a *wafers*-like substance *with honey* from verse 31 made me hungry at 3:53 PM this past Wednesday.¹⁰ So, don't imagine this as something akin to a slice of Bunny Bread from your local Kroger. This description likely meant that the manna wasn't bland, but rather tasty.¹¹ And verse 8 again states that they would be satisfied with what the LORD provided. That's the idea behind *you shall be filled with bread.*¹² Israel is undeservedly nourished by not only what God gives, but who God is. He is slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness. That they are allowed to not only eat good things, but to continue breathing air after breathing out complaints says much about the LORD's mindboggling compassion.

⁸ I imagine there is less grumbling at any given seaside sunset than most other places.

⁹ This is not the final cameo for quail among the Israelites, as indicated in the responsive reading today. They will light once more into Numbers 11, yet not provided in the same spirit we find in Exodus 16. In Numbers, two years after our text, the patience of God had run its course and copious amounts of quail would be given as a punishment to their complaints, as indicated by the words, *“Therefore the LORD will give you meat...for a whole month, until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you; because you have rejected the LORD who is among you...”* (11:18-20).

¹⁰ Exodus 16:31

¹¹ Stuart, 384.

¹² Jeffrey Leonard, *The Preacher's Hebrew Companion to Exodus 15-40*, 16.

Have we not, brother and sister, known such mercies as these? When you eye that Shepherding Group feast today, remember, God fills our menus. We have daily bread given to us with daily patience. And God lavishes such grace on us while not only hearing our grumblings but forgiving them based on the work of His Son for us. And like Israel, we possess promises yet to be fulfilled. John Flavel says that God’s promises are likened to someone bearing a child. He writes that she “must accomplish her appointed months, and only when she has done so will she bear the child. When it comes to God’s promises, Providence will *midwife* the mercies...and not one of them will fail to be delivered.”¹³ The Lord will provide what we need. He is patient in the outworking of His promises, which are all yes and amen in Christ Jesus.¹⁴

III. The LORD commanded with commemoration

As a matter of the LORD continuing to test His people’s faithfulness, He gave them instruction on how they were to go about gathering this daily provision of manna. The instructions from Yahweh were clear. There are four basic commands in our passage. One, verse 9, ***Come near before the LORD***. This we’ve considered. Two, verse 16, ***Gather of it every man as much as he should eat; you shall take an omer apiece according to the number of persons each of you has in his tent***. Three, verse 19, ***Let no man leave any of it until morning***. Four, verse 26, ***Six days you shall gather it, but on the seventh day, the sabbath, there will be none***.

Israel started out doing great. They obeyed by drawing near as the LORD appeared by cloud in the wilderness. And they measured the bread out carefully according to the number of each family we see in verse 17. But they began slipping in their obedience. First, the instruction was that the day’s new manna had to be consumed that very day, but there’s always that guy, or gal, or group! Some attempted to hoard the manna so that they could eat it the next day.¹⁵ Verse 20, ***But they did not listen to Moses, and some left part of it until morning, and it bred worms and became foul...*** And justly so, ***Moses was angry with them***. You know this kind of frustration with selfishness. “I left my lunch in the break room refrigerator, and now it’s gone!” “I bought enough pizza for everyone to have 3 pieces. How are we out?” Moses is rightly perturbed, and it won’t be the last time.

The second slippage for Israel concerned gathering food in preparation for a special day of each week—the Sabbath. Verse 29, ***See, the LORD has given you the sabbath***. This is the very first mention of the Sabbath in the Old Testament. The word ***Sabbath*** means *stoppage*.¹⁶ The LORD would provide ***bread for two days on the sixth day***, but none on the Sabbath. There is no evidence that the Sabbath was practiced in Egypt, and most certainly wouldn’t have been a rhythm granted by Egyptian rulers for her slaves. But we know that the concept is not a stranger to what God had already established from the beginning. This one day of honor among six was a pattern already built into the order of creation—six days God created the heavens and the earth and on the seventh day He rested.¹⁷ So, what is God going here? He is establishing a point of imitation.¹⁸ They are being called upon to be like the LORD their God—gather for six days and rest on the seventh. And

¹³ John Flavel, *The Mystery of Providence*, 191.

¹⁴ Philippians 1:6

¹⁵ Desmond Alexander, *AOTC: Exodus*, 325.

¹⁶ Douglas Stuart, *NAC: Exodus*, 381.

¹⁷ Genesis 2:2-3 (Further, the language of *morning* and *evening* from verse 13 harkens back to creation.)

¹⁸ Ross Blackburn, *The God Who Makes Himself Known*, 71.

we'll hear this call to imitate a holy LORD throughout the Pentateuch and on into the New Testament.¹⁹

But we can't ignore that the Sabbath is also enacted here as a look ahead to what God would write on the tablet of the Law in Exodus 20. Israel will come to understand that the occasion of the one day in seven isn't simply a cessation from physical activity, but it's also a kind of spiritual discipline to worship and trust in the LORD inside that rest. It was the day to be kept holy to Him.²⁰ There existed a hindsight and a foresight to this Sabbath command.

But some failed to keep this instruction of Sabbath rest from this particular starting line. Verse 27, ***And it came about on the seventh day that some of the people went out to gather, but they found none.*** Straightforward instructions with a crooked result.²¹ And here is the second point of frustration. This time it's from the LORD's direction to Moses, who represented the people to the LORD and the LORD to the people. Verse 28, ***Then the LORD said to Moses, "How long do you refuse to keep My commandments and My instructions?"*** God followed this question by clarifying the expectations in verse 29. Moses presumably relayed this to the people, and they finally got it right according to verse 30. God loved His people by providing for them physically and spiritually.

He lastly marks this provision of manna with a command. Verse 32, ***Let an omerful of it be kept throughout your generations, that they may see the bread that I fed you in the wilderness, when I brought you out of the land of Egypt.*** Israel was to keep remembering this heavenly bread gifted from above. Aaron was tasked to take a jar and place manna in it. In the months to come, they would marry that jar with the other items with ***the Testimony***, which is another word for the tablets of stone commandments. Eventually this bread sample would join the tablets and Aaron's staff into the ark of the covenant.²²

Conclusion

Saving us is not the period, but the comma. Christ has rescued us from sin's curse, but He is also at work in us to bring us all the way Home; to be our final Sabbath rest. And to do that, He knows our frame and remembers we are but dust. We need provisions for our bodies. We need patience because sin remains until He appears. This is who we find Jesus to be. The refrain in Exodus, *so that you shall know that I am the LORD your God*, now shines with exquisite brilliance because of Him. 1 John 5:20, *"And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life."* In Christ, we are given more than what a bare desert-world can yield and more than what our oft-discontented hearts deserve.

Do you know this true God and eternal life, who knows nothing of half-measures? If not, you're living under foreboding promises of condemnation and separation from the God of grace. He invites the discontented to turn from sin to Him, where true rest is found. He gives gladness where

¹⁹ Leviticus 19:2, 20:7, 21:8; Ephesians 5:1; 1 Peter 1:16

²⁰ Stuart, 457.

²¹ This began the pattern that continued to not only develop in Exodus, but to escalate.

²² Hebrews 9:3-4, *"Behind the second curtain was a second section called the Most Holy Place, [4] having the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant covered on all sides with gold, in which was a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron's staff that budded, and the tablets of the covenant."*

grumbling once reigned. If you have come to Christ by faith, you know something of this transformation. But you know that He's not done. He has saved us and He will sustain us because He is leading us somewhere. Peter says it beautifully—"*According to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.*"²³

²³ 2 Peter 3:13