



The Provision of the Wilderness

Exodus 16:1-36

Grace Church | 3.20.22

This is our third week in Lent exploring our theme of Wilderness. Again remember Lent is a time of fasting and repentance to prepare us for Easter. Two weeks ago we considered how we entered into the wilderness of this world: because of sin, we have been cast out of the garden into the wilderness, and called to cultivate the wilderness, but not without pain and suffering and hardship. Last week through the call of Abraham we saw how God is in the business of calling us out of the known, safe places we have built to cope with our wilderness problem, and towards the unknown with him, trusting his promises. And if all of us in Christ have felt that call, all of us have also experienced the realities of our text today. When God calls us to leave the comforts of idolatry and go with him into the wilderness, when we buy into the journey of following Jesus, we will experience *need*. This world is in many places a spiritual wasteland: no spiritual food, no spiritual drink, no spiritual rest.

One author describes the world we have created for ourselves like a lion habitat. Why do lions *pace* at the zoo, when all our physical needs seem to be met, when they live longer in captivity than the wild, when their habitat was built just for them? Because ultimately, their habitat is a kind of wasteland, a wilderness: it's an imitation of a true lion's home.¹ It may have been built *for* them, but it's not really the home of a lion—it's a copy. So this world, it's not our home, it's an imitation of home. And while sometimes we taste great joys of our real habitat, that perfect garden with God, ultimately we are strangers and aliens and wanderers. And what that does to us is it can create in us anxiety, pacing, a lack of rest. We are famished, because our true rest is found not here in the wilderness in our man-made habitat, but in the habitat of God's presence. The author of Hebrews calls it "longing for a better, heavenly country".

So here in our story, we find the people of Israel. God has made good on his promise to Abraham, and now there are great people from his line. But they are in the wilderness still, they have not possessed the land God promised. See **verse 1**, They have been called out, like Abram from Ur, out of Egypt with the promise of a better, heavenly, country. But already, they are anxious, restless, and hungry. It's a bit barren out here.

So in our text today, we have two primary actors: Israel, and God. It is natural and right to associate firstly with Israel, so we will do that first, then consider God's response. First we will see our wilderness grumbling, then God's merciful provision.

¹ Alan Noble, *You Are Not Your Own*



Our Wilderness Grumbling

I need no elaborate illustration for all of us to immediately identify with the response of Israel to the barrenness of the wilderness in **verse 2**. One month or so since the Exodus, and the fumes of adrenaline have run out and reality check has set in. They are hungry, and so they grumble. Of course, none of us have never resorted to grumbling, right? We grew out of that when we turned what, 6 or 7 years old?

We all know that grumbling is a sin that often gets a respectable pass, because life is difficult. By grumbling I don't mean true lament, which we will talk about next week. I don't mean bringing your cares to one another, your hurts and pains to God and to the church. We are not a people who just "grin and bear it" when we are in need. There is a difference between a groan of faith, where we pray for help, and a grumble. A faithful groan means we are ready to receive whatever God has, we are full of hopeful faith in the midst of pain. This kind of groaning, when legitimate, is worship. But in effect, a grumble is anti-worship. Instead of saying: "I need help to trust God", grumbling says "I don't want to trust God." See the difference? Kids, you may have heard this from your parents? When they say to you: "stop grumbling, stop whining." This passage may help you this morning to obey your parents in the Lord. But know that your parents also struggle with this too, maybe in more subtle ways. When things don't go our way, we grumble, complain, and whine. And God takes this seriously, because what he wants for you is far greater than discontent. **Let's examine four examples of wilderness grumbling from this text.**

We Forget God's Faithful Past

We see this immediately in **verse 2-3**. The text says that the whole congregation grumbled—this was not a small subset of the people. This was a full-out uprising, a cultural issue. Grumbling was the sin of Israel they could never quite shake, right up there with idolatry. And the first example of their grumbling is that they have forgotten what the past was really like. They long for Egypt!

No doubt they had a good fill of meat in Egypt. Remember, there were cattle ranchers. But they are only remembering part of the story. In Egypt, they cried out to God because they were under severe oppression. As they see it now, they would rather serve Pharaoh, they would rather submit to the whip of his taskmasters and the slaughtering of their children at a whim, as long as they had plenty to eat. In fact, look at what they say: they would have rather have died "by the hand of the Lord". In other words, they consider themselves as less fortunate now than the Egyptians who perished and suffered under God's plagues. God sent the plagues of Egypt to show his great salvation power to his people and to the nations, and just a few weeks later, the Israelites have interpreted it as God's mercy not for them, but for their enemies! In essence, they are saying: better to enter into destruction by God's hands full than go with God empty into the unknown.

Grumbling causes us to forget God's faithfulness to us in the past. We downplay God's faithfulness by distorting our need then and his work for us then. The word for this is nostalgia. But it's a



specific kind of nostalgia—it’s a nostalgia that looks backwards and begins to drift into foolishness for what was. We can have all kinds of grumbling that starts this way. We can have political nostalgia, where we desire a past governmental climate; social nostalgia, where we remember all our past friendships as only sweet and never hard; economic nostalgia, where we wish we had the bank account we had years ago. But the most striking nostalgia is spiritual nostalgia: when God feels far, and Eden feels further, when we are spiritually hungry, we are yearning for something to satisfy, we often turn towards our former life of sin. Even if we don’t express it in outward grumbling, we begin to believe that slavery to sin is better than dependence on God. And in doing so, we forget the faithfulness of God, the gospel fades from our view, and grumbling sets in.

Do you ever have this fantasy, where you wonder what life would be like if you abandoned your faith? If you were free to do whatever, be whatever? Do you find yourself believing the lies of sin, that your life before Christ was not all too bad, that Egypt had its choice delights? This is what grumbling does to us: it causes us to forget just how powerful God’s salvation is. God moved heaven and earth to take his people from Egypt, he made the river blood and the day night. In Christ, God has done more to save you from your slavery to sin. He split his own blood, Jesus the passover lamb. There is nothing for you back in Egypt: and grumbling now in the wilderness will only cause you grief, because there is no freedom in running back to your slavemaster of sin.

We Distort Our True Need

Israel wasn’t quite starving yet. No doubt, their future in the wilderness looked bleak—but they still had herds and cattle. We know this because right after this in chapter 17, they grumble again of thirst, asking Moses why he has led them into the wilderness so that their *livestock* could die of thirst. No, they are not starving yet. Kids, this is like when you tell your parents you are starving and they look at you with that eye, like “really? You just ate a few hours ago.” Exaggeration is the brother of grumbling.

Not only was Israel exaggerating their need, they had just been provided with water and an oasis at Elim. God was meeting their needs, they had not suffered long. Another common marker of grumbling is impatience—the Israelites could not count on God to provide in his own timing.

All of this highlights that Israel has mistaken their true need. They believe what they need is food and water. They had that in Egypt, so why not wish we were there! But God knows their true need was more spiritual than physical. **Look at verse 4.** In the wilderness, God is testing his people, teaching them, disciplining them, helping them to trust him after a long time trusting in Egyptian pharaohs. They have not yet received the Law: GOD is helping prepare them for it.

So it is with us. Let’s not distort our true need. We are not at the place yet where God has abandoned us. You may feel like he has led you into the wilderness, but it is God who has led you! You may feel like you are spiritually starving, but here you are this morning, receiving the word of God. Exaggeration and impatience in God’s provision lead us to a place of grumbling where we are prone to miss the varied grace of God. Let us remember that every moment we are being sustained



by God's kindness, and let us think again how in Christ, our greatest need has been met. What is hunger, what is thirst, what is suffering? Simply God's way to teach us and test us—for if we are in Christ, we are full even when we feel empty. God is treating us as his children, we can trust him. He is preparing us to trust him now, so that in time he can grant us more and more of his blessing. Remember the parable of the talents? "For everyone who has will more be given."

We Place Our Grumbling on Others

For now, skip ahead to **verse 8**. Israel blamed Moses and Aaron, mistrusting their leaders. When grumbling comes, it has to be directed somewhere. Oftentimes it is our circumstances: we can't believe our luck, we say. We just need a break. But oftentimes our grumbling is pointed at others: leaders, those with influence or authority, or those who we feel like can change our situation. A good way to identify grumbling is to look and see if gossip has also slipped in. It's never really our fault, is it? But what does Moses say to the people? What are we?

All grumbling is against God. A complaining spirit is a sign that in some way you have begun to mistrust God. Even when you complain to parents, to spouse, to kids, or to authority, you are not just speaking to them but to God, saying clearly to him: "I cannot trust that you are after my good. I cannot trust that you will provide. I cannot trust that you are who you say you are."

Friends, we all face trials in the wilderness. But in Christ, we can trust God. He is working through every circumstance: even the boss that drives you crazy, the situation you feel is to your disadvantage. Bring your concerns to him, don't grumble behind his back. He is a kind father, ready to hear you.

We Mistrust God's Clear Instructions

Skip ahead to **verse 19-20**, and to **verses 27-28**. The Israelites are given two rules in God's great provision of manna. First, they should only gather what they need, so that God can provide each day. They are not to leave any of it over until the morning. Secondly, they are not to gather on the 7th day, on Sabbath. Instead, for one day they will receive twice as much, and what they keep on that day will be preserved.

The issue for Israelites is that they are an agrarian people. They know how to harvest. They know you always harvest what is there, they know you have to store up what you can. They know you can't afford many days off. So instead of trusting God, they trust their expertise. They believe that they know better than God how to harvest, so when given clear instructions for Sabbath and gathering of manna, they try to bend the rules.

We say we trust God, but we would rather receive his blessing on our terms. Christ asks of us many things: he tells us to leave behind personal gain, to take up our cross, to live for the advancement of the gospel and his kingdom rather than ours. He calls us to deny our sinful desire, to embrace a sexual ethic that is not popular, to devote ourselves to prayer before we devote ourselves to



productivity. And it's hard to trust him when the commands feel strange. It's hard to trust him when he tells us the way to salvation is by marching around Jericho blowing trumpets.

Jesus trusted his Father all the way to offering his own life. God will call us to sacrifice our own desires, he will call us to things as radical as Sabbath rest, but remember again he is testing our faith. We can lean in to Jesus, who never grumbled or mistrusted when called to the cross. He has shown us in his example that the way to follow God in the wilderness is like a lamb led to the slaughter, he opened not his mouth. But not only do we have an example of how to avoid grumbling in Christ, we also have provision in the midst of our grumbling and imperfect faith. Let's go there now.

God's Merciful Provision

We will go through these rather quickly, and then show how all of this mercy culminates for us in our faithful savior Jesus Christ.

He Hears Us In Our Sin

Back to **verse 8**. Look at this: remember that the whole congregation was grumbling. It was like a huge uprising, audible for miles. Hundreds of thousands of people, if not more, all moaning and grumbling and making a ruckus. God hears it, no doubt. Parents understand: the more kids they have, the more grumbling intensifies. Teachers know this, coaches, anyone who has ever tried to satisfy an unruly group. The easiest thing to do is tune out. The thing you want to do is shout to make them stop. But what does God do when our grumbling reaches his ears? **Verse 7**. He shows us his glory. He hears us in our sin, and has mercy on us. What does his mercy look like? Not coming in anger, not ignoring. But rather, **verse 9**, he class us to draw close.

This phrase, "come near before the Lord", is a call for Israel to come and gather together for worship. And notice what happens in **verse 10**. God draws near, his glory shines through. Now, his glory can be a terrifying thing for Israel. But here he appears in the cloud, the very same way he has been guiding them so far in the wilderness. And instead of abandoning them, he gives them what they are grumbling for. His patience outweighs this mistrust. He gives them even more than what they need: a feast of quail and tasty bread (honey wafers, the best you can eat)!

I want you to hear this. God will not bless you because of your sin, but if you are in Christ, your sin cannot keep you from his blessing. You cannot out grumble the generosity of God. Jesus' incarnation is evidence that God hears us in our grumbling. God did not wait until his people cleaned up their act before acting in sending his Son. His glory cannot be hidden behind the shadow of our sin. Jesus came out of the wilderness to reveal God's glory to us. He came from the wilderness of a virgin's womb. He came out of Egypt, where he fled from persecution. He came out of the desert of temptation, and what is his invitation? Come near before the Lord. Do you have many sins that prevent you from coming near? He can take them all.



He Meets Our Daily Need

There was a specific point to God instructing Israel to gather *every day*. We often desire to see all of God's provision laid out for us in a five year or ten year plan. We need to see ahead before we can trust. But God is teaching us: my mercies are new every morning. You need me today, and you will need me tomorrow. What I desire is child-like faith and trust. My toddler doesn't know what tomorrow will bring. He doesn't understand days and time well yet. He is learning, but he must operate on trust. If I wake him in the morning and say: "today we are going to the park", that is enough for him. But if I say: "next year we are going to the park", of course it means nothing. He needs to trust every day.

God will give you what you need today, and when you get where you are going next week, next year, or next decade, he will still be there. That is his promise. And you know how we trust that? Jesus told us: behold I am with you always, to the very end. When he taught us to pray, he said to pray: "Give us this day, our daily bread". Then when he left this earth, he said : I will send my Spirit". The promise of the Spirit is the promise that God will always meet our needs and never leave us empty. He fills us up, again and again, with himself.

He Teaches Us To Rest

The fascinating thing about daily bread is that what it teaches us is that the real secret to provision in the wilderness of life is not that we have our full to eat, but that we have rest from our labor. If we can trust God to provide for us every day, then we can also trust him when he tells us: take a break, I've got this. It's a miracle that every 6th day, there was enough for two days, layers and layers of manna. God is teaching us that because he is our great provider, we don't have to rely on ourselves to find peace.

How difficult is it for you to really rest? Most students I know do homework all weekend. Most parents I know can't find time to really pray in all their busyness. Most corporate jobs I know demand more and more hours on the job. And most taxing is our spiritual work. We are always trying to prove ourselves, to meet expectations, to please God.

Resting is hard, because we put too much trust in ourselves. But this is the point of the wilderness: to cause us not to rely on ourselves but on God! God doesn't need you—you sleep most of your life anyway. Resting on the Sabbath distinguished Israel from other nations. The way you rest will distinguish you from those far from Christ. But the way you rest is not just by taking a break from your physical gathering and working. The way you rest is by trusting that God has met all your needs with bread from Heaven.

So they said to him, "Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform? 31 Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" 32 Jesus then said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true



bread from heaven. 33 For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” 34 They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.”

35 Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.

Here Jesus could not be any clearer. He is our bread, the bread that gives life. He is the sign from Heaven that God has met all of our needs. So then it makes sense too that he is our Sabbath. We find our true rest in Jesus. What does this mean? It means we do not have to prove ourselves any longer. We are proven before God when we receive the righteousness of God. It means that we don't have to worry and wonder: will I survive this wilderness? We can rest, because Jesus is the bread we need to survive and he has been given to us already. Sabbath is ultimately about *trusting* God. Jesus says: “the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” In other words, Sabbath wasn't created first, some standard that God made, that we have to get really good at resting. God created Sabbath as a blessing, not as a goal. Jesus says, come to me all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Jesus worked to the point of death, so that you can learn to rest.

Ultimately, we find our rest in God's final promise. That this provision he has provided, he will never take away.

He Holds Our Future Forever

Notice the last part of the text here in **31-36**. God commands them to put aside some of the manna to be remembered in the ark. And it tells us in **verse 35** that they ate manna every day for forty years! That is a long time. What is this teaching us? That God does not provide only to come up dry and empty. He doesn't give you what you need in this life only: the provision he gives you in Jesus now in your wilderness lasts until you reach the promised land with him. He will never forsake you or stop providing your daily need.

37 All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. 38 For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. 39 And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. 40 For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.” 48 I am the bread of life. 49 Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. 50 This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die.

Jesus' broken body is the evidence that we will never go hungry again, and we will never die or be cast out. If we feast on him, our provision is for eternity. Even death can't rob you of your bread.



Remember, we are not created for this world as it is. We are created for a perfect one. So it makes sense you would feel, like a caged lion, that there is some barrenness, some hollowness to this world. But the solution to your barrenness, your wilderness wandering, your sense of being far from home, doesn't come behind you. Nostalgia won't save you. Grumbling cannot free us, or hold us over. We need daily bread. We need to press on, looking ahead towards the goal. And friend, today, if you put your trust in Christ, you have everything you need. Because if you put your trust in Christ, he is holding you. He is feeding you and leading you back home with him, where you belong.

This is the promise of the gospel: provision in the wilderness. God is not withholding from you. Is Jesus enough for you? Instead of grumbling, let's turn to him with thankful hearts ready to receive with joy from the table of the Lord, Jesus our bread.

