

Sermon 47, Grumbling, Pt. 1: Water, Obedience, Provision, Exodus 15:22-27

Proposition: God demands that instead of grumbling we obey Him — and when we obey Him, we live in health, fullness, and blessing.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, 'tis but a step from the sublime to the ridiculous. That maxim proves itself yet again in our text this evening. Last week we saw the massive and glorious song of the sea; Handel's 50-minute setting does not do it justice (though it is a good start!). This week, we see the people's next move, which is to grumble.

Folks, this is a serious sin. And it is not just confined to children. Adults who have seen the salvation of God and sung about it with all their hearts can turn and be full of moaning, groaning, and whining about the terrible conditions that they face. We all know certain people who are full of complaints and have a new grumble every time you speak to them. Brothers and sisters, Moses tackles that problem head-on here and in the next two episodes. Israel grumbles at Mara here in Ex. 15; in the next chapter, they grumble in the wilderness of Sin; and in the chapter after that, they grumble at Rephidim. Lord-willing, we will spend a week looking at each one of these episodes. Interestingly, after the people leave Sinai there are three more grumbling episodes in Numbers 14-17. This is not a problem that was easily overcome, and if you have a complaining tongue in your head, you will know that it is not easy to stop. By and large grumbling is not a sin that our congregation is given over to. Thank God — and watch yourself. Gripe sessions are only too common, whether about your spouse, your boss, your parents, your children, your country, your neighbors, or all of the above. And God hates them. He demands that instead of grumbling we obey Him, and when we obey Him, we live in health, fullness, and blessing.

I. Moses' Leading: 3 Days, No Water, v. 22

Well, God reigns forever and ever. The singing and dancing are real. But so is the endless walk through the desert, and by the third day without water, you are feeling pretty low. Why did

Moses lead them this way? The text specifically says that Moses led them out. We know that they were following the pillar of cloud and fire, and that ultimately the Son of God was leading them. But the text doesn't mention Him. It mentions Moses and his colossal miscalculation.

Has anyone had the misfortune of hauling thirsty children home in the car? The pleading for water after they've been playing in the sun and eating hot dogs can get unbearable. And that is usually during a two or three minute car ride! Israel, though, had been without water for three whole days. Forget being hangry. They were so dried out that all they could think or talk about was water.

II. The Grumbling Begins, vv. 23-24

Well, Moses gave them water all right; on the third day they arrived at Mara, and thank God, there was water there. Except it didn't take long to discover that the water was utterly undrinkable. Even after three waterless days of desert travel, this water was so bad that no one could stomach it.

The burner has been set to "high" and the situation is ripe for boiling over. And boil over it did; the people grumbled to Moses. Later on, in another scenario of grumbling, Moses tells God that the people are almost ready to stone him. Here it's not that bad, not anywhere near that bad. But it's bad: The people merely say "What shall we drink?" They didn't say anything too horrible, but there was that edge in their voice that indicated that the one who had not provided water was most definitely going to be held responsible.

How is this grumbling? The answer, as we all know, is that grumbling is in the attitude. There can be a legitimate pointing out of a problem. There can also be an illegitimate grumbling about the problem. What is the difference between the two? The difference is in whether you are content to submit to God's providence in sending the problem to you. Submitting to His providence does *not* mean that you say "Oh well, I will not do anything about this problem." It means that you say "God has allowed me to waste two hours on this event that should have taken half an hour. I wish I had spent my time in a different way today, but I still trust my Father's providence and I submit to it with a good grace."

I'm struggling to express the difference; all I can say is that in the vast majority of cases it is obvious whether someone is grumbling or legitimately pointing out a genuine issue. The difference, again, is precisely the difference between a good attitude and a bad attitude. The good attitude is one that is fundamentally committed to the LORD and trusting that He will provide, even though terrible evils are staring us in the face. The bad attitude is one that is fundamentally upset with the LORD and doubting whether He will come through this time. The bad attitude is one that lets the presence of evil overwhelm the presence of God.

III. God's Preliminary Response to Grumbling, v. 25-27

Well, the people grumbled, and God responded. Clearly, the core of this episode and the reason it's included in the narrative is to tell us something about how God responds to grumbling.

A. He Provides Everything You Need (not Everything You Want), v. 25a

His first response was to provide what they needed. He gave them water. In the next chapter, He will give food — bread and meat. And in ch. 17, He will once again provide water. The overall

message is that God will give you everything you need. In this case, He used the tree to purify the water and suck out the bitterness, thus making it drinkable. The waters became sweet.

When you cry out to God with a legitimate need, you can trust that He will help you! If you need water in order to live, He may withhold it and let you die. If that is the case, you didn't need physical life. You needed to die and come to Heaven with Him. And so it goes. In some cases God answers prayers with an unqualified "yes." In others He answers with a different answer, one perhaps completely different from what you were asking for. Again, the question is one of attitude. Do you trust that if you need it, God will give it to you, and conversely that if you don't have it He doesn't think you need it? Are you willing to submit to Him even if He sends you a life in which you are poor, sick, single, stuck in a bad marriage, or otherwise deprived of things that the rest of the world seems to have and enjoy? If the answer is no, then you believe that you are the final arbiter of your needs. If the answer is yes, then you have turned it all over to God. You believe that He will decide what you need and He will provide what you need.

B. He Makes a Rule: Obey All Rules, v. 25b

Well, the text goes on to tell us that at Marah God made a rule, a "statute and a judgment." I agree with those who think that this phrase is not describing two rules, but one, and thus translate it as "a binding judgment." Here at Marah, just three days after the final departure from Egypt, God had a little Defining The Relationship talk with Israel. And He told them that the parameters of their relationship were very simple: He commands. Israel obeys. That is the binding judgment that He laid upon them. It was a judgment to the effect that He is the one in charge, that He is the one leading them, and that He will provide for them.

Brothers and sisters, the Christian life stands under this same binding judgment. God has told us what we need to know and what we need to do. The first and in one sense the only thing we need to do is to obey all His rules, including the ones against grumbling and complaining. To grumble is to break the Fifth Commandment. It is to break the First Commandment, because instead of worshipping God you instead worship your own desires.

So God makes a rule telling us to obey all rules. That was the outcome of the people's complaint. It was not an apology from God for leading them through waterless country. It was not an apology for making them rely on Him even when they did find water. It was a rule demanding that His people obey Him.

C. He Tests Your Obedience, v. 25c

But not only did He tell them there that they were obligated to obey Him. He also tested them. The sequence is clear: It's not that He led them without water to test them, then made a rule for them against complaining. Rather, He made the rule first and then tested them as to how comprehensively they would keep it. The test had penalties for failure and rewards for passing.

1. Disobedience Brings Egyptian Disease

The LORD speaks of the blessings first. If you do these four things — all different ways of describing a zealous and scrupulous obedience — then you will be spared from the diseases of the Egyptians. Some commentators speak of Egypt as a notoriously sickly place; others quote

Herodotus, who describes the Egyptians as remarkably healthy. So which is it? I have no idea. Origen chose rather to identify the disease in question here as “the Egyptian sickness,” i.e., love of the world, and I think that approach is fruitful too. Regardless of whether God is speaking about well-known physical illnesses, the Ten Plagues, or something else, the message ends up more than clear: If you don’t listen to the Lord, don’t do what is right in His sight, don’t give ear to His commandments, and don’t keep His statutes, you will be sicker than an Egyptian. Good health is one of the blessings He provides to those who obey Him. Disobedience, on the contrary, brings about ill health. Do you want to be sickly? Get on meth. Disobey your parents. Break the law. And soon enough, health, including mental health, will be a distant memory.

2. Obedience Brings Health because Yahweh Is Healer

You see, the point is that obedience brings health because Jehovah-Rapha; Yahweh is Healer! The core of Israel’s relationship with God, now that they have been redeemed, is this demand that they obey all rules. And God promises that He is going to test their obedience. He’s going to test your obedience and mine. He will lead you into temptation. He won’t personally tempt you, but His providence will most definitely lead you into places where the world, the devil, and your own traitorous flesh do their utmost to tempt you to sin. And if you give in, you can expect to get sick. If you stand strong, you can expect to see His healing — maybe in this life, but certainly in the next, when death and sickness of every description will have been permanently eliminated. Jesus is the Great Physician; Yahweh is healer. That doesn’t mean that all Christians are free from sickness in this life. It means instead that all Christians will be healed, that all wrongs will be set right and all sicknesses reversed in God’s good time. And God Himself will be the one who does it— indeed, He is the only one who can do it. No one else could heal like Yahweh; no one else can set the world to rights.

D. He Provides Everything You Want, v. 27

Well, with that promise of healing given, indeed, joined to His name, God goes on to lead Israel to Elim. And there, I think we can safely say, He provides everything they could possibly want — all the water, all the shade, all the wonderful rest and refreshment that they were seeking and had not found since crossing the Red Sea.

Brothers and sisters, do you want to live at Marah or Elim? To be in bitterness or refreshment? To be healthy in obedience, or sick in disobedience? To grumble about God’s providence, or trust His provision?

It wasn’t easy to get to Elim; the people couldn’t get there without Yahweh’s provision. But I beg you not to camp in bitterness at Marah, complaining about God and angry about the perceived injustice of it all. You need God’s healing. So go to Him and get it, and then travel on to the place of refreshment, where you can see His healing up close and real. Amen.