

**Exodus 15:22-16:36**  
**A habit of unhappiness**

**Aim: tackle grumbling**

*Hell begins, wrote C S Lewis, with a grumbling mood, always complaining, always blaming others.*

*It's not a question of God 'sending' us to Hell. In each of us there is something growing up which will of itself be Hell unless it is nipped in the bud.*

He wrote some very thought-provoking stuff, did that man. If he's right, or even anywhere near it, he's talking there of something that is frightfully serious. And I think he is onto something, because we can find this scary imagery in the Bible:

***And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.***

(James 3:6)

Now the Bible doesn't just give us straightforward teaching on this topic of grumbling - probably one of the chief things James was talking about there, although of course what we've read would also include reference to stuff like lying as well. But the Bible also gives us accounts or stories in which things like this feature, and we can see the kinds of consequences.

It's not just part of human nature, but part of *fallen* human nature. If we are content to just let it be in our individual or family or church life, it is as if we see **signs of smoke** that will all too soon most likely progress to even more destructive flame. It's an **infection** that needs treatment before it warrants an amputation.

It's a sure sign of a darkness in the heart, too, because I don't think that grumbling is merely something we do with our lips ... or maybe that **roll of the eyes** ... but it's an expression of the heart, too. Remember Jesus' words about the connection between the heart - the real us on the inside - and the words we speak:

***"... each tree is known by its own fruit. ... out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks."***

(Luke 6:44-45)

So the question, back in that passage in Exodus 15 and 16, is not just what those people said, but the attitude that led them to express themselves so quickly in that way. Go back to the beginning of Exodus, and you'll find they did the same there. Read on through the accounts of those times, and you'll find over a dozen instances when the same ugly thing attitude overflows, time and again. One of the lessons we are *told* we must learn from those days is:

***We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer.***

(1 Corinthians 10:9-10)

We can summarise our chapter-and-a-bit this morning by saying that **as the Hebrews commence their journey, initial difficulties prompt grumbles about their leadership**. But let's look in a bit more detail, and let those words speak to us. Let's not think simply that we are studying *them*. It is rather that *they* are disclosing *us* - like those **tablets** that you can use to show where your teeth aren't being properly brushed.

And then - are we willing to pray that the Holy Spirit will get to work, *brushing* us free of that spiritual plaque?

So ... the Hebrews' journeys start in earnest:

- **Stage 1: clean water**

***Then Moses made Israel set out from the Red Sea, ...***

(Exodus 15:22)

I'm assuming here that you know sufficient of the story so far:  
how the Hebrews ended up as **slaves in Egypt**  
how God responded to their **cry for help**,  
how **Moses** is sent to Pharaoh, and after those increasing levels of sanctions against Pharaoh and his people for their refusal to set God's people free  
how there is that final **showdown** at the Red Sea, leaving Pharaoh's army decimated, and God's people finally liberated  
and how the first three quarters of chapter 15 records the celebratory **song** composed to mark that event with praise to God:

***Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the LORD, saying, "I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea. ..."***

(Exodus 15:1)

But here, at verse 22, is where we pick up the story line:

***Then Moses made Israel set out from the Red Sea, ...***

(Exodus 15:22)

Not what you'd find as "the Red Sea" on modern maps, but we're probably looking at those boggy areas just marginally inland from that, right up at the northern tip. And it's not at all certain precisely where the various places that are named here actually were. But there is a general pattern that is fairly safe: they're going **east** from Egypt, but not turning north, directly towards the land that God has promised them, but south, down into the Sinai peninsula. And probably, since they would have

had donkeys instead of camels, they have to avoid the deep desert, so they'll start off by moving south along the more coastal strip of land. But even there, water is going to be at an immense premium.

And actually I have to say that I'm quite impressed with the end of this first verse:

***Then Moses made Israel set out from the Red Sea, and they went into the wilderness of Shur. They went three days in the wilderness and found no water.***

(Exodus 15:22)

Do you notice what is *not* said there? Look! No water ... but *no comment*. At that point there is *no* grumbling mentioned. But I think I need to pause right away, and make comment on that.

Folks, I remember one of the managers back in my lab days, who was so very reluctant ever to give any praise to his staff. When people had done what by all accounts was a very satisfactory piece of work - and we might even say a **good job!** - this guy just didn't make anything of it. He was challenged about it, and answered that it was just his staff *doing* their job. What's to give special praise for? They'd get the right pay rise at the end of the year. (Shrug of shoulders)

Now, not that I think we should start to get twitchy about this, and go over the top. I'm not saying that we need to start saying things glibly and thoughtlessly. But have you ever looked to find something commendable in the people around you ... and then to gently commend them for it. I don't mean specially sending cards back and forth ... "thank you for your thank you card" kind of stuff. Just a word of ... *Thanks for ... I appreciated that ...* Even if the dot-dot-dot's are just fairly routine courtesies.

I'm just meaning, really, can we train ourselves to notice when people do things well - and comment positively - rather than reserve our speech for when we want or need to give them a good verbal kicking?

So, even if the "wanderings in the wilderness" *are* much more characterised by grumbling ... at least we must notice that on this first occasion, they *didn't*. Not that it actually lasted for long, though ...

***When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter; therefore it was named Marah.***

(Exodus 15:23)

That's certainly realistic. Metal salts leached out of the surrounding ground could certainly make what looks like a wonderful oasis not a source of water but of frustration.

And you know what is likely to happen with that kind of provocation!

***And the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?"***  
(Exodus 15:24)

And look, that's what grumbling is. That's why I corrected my initial summary sentence from *complaints* about their leadership to *grumbles* about it. It's possible to register a complaint in a totally acceptable way. I've taken something back to Tesco because it was past its sell-by date when I bought it - only I hadn't noticed until later. And I have to bear witness that Tesco's Help Desk was fine in responding to that complaint: I was invited to replace the offending item with another one that was in code.

But grumbling, I think I'd say, on reflection, has that extra word that you see here in this sentence, ***against***. It is directed *at* someone. Notice the way it's translated. Not "they complained *to* Moses", making the statement that the water isn't drinkable. Instead, they grumbled *against* him - quite possibly not to his face at all, and using a very loaded-sounding question.

See the implication contained in that grumble? That Moses has let them down in some way. He has been remiss. Or maybe he's so stupid that he doesn't realise that they're desperately thirsty? Which is it? Is he useless or stupid ... or probably both?

And it's just a reaction to the situation, rather than a search for a solution. It's just letting the frustration boil over *at the expense of* Moses.

Folks, let me push this a bit further, though. I know we're taking ages just getting started in this passage, but I think it's really important to get some of these basics in place first.

So, you might come back at me and say that at times we grumble, yes, but "it's just letting off steam". The target of our words is only a nominal target. Moses doesn't necessarily know. **Boris Johnson** or Matt Hancock doesn't realise that we've called them an idiot for this or that Coronavirus ruling, so how does that hurt them? We're not really aiming at them, personally. It's just a response to the situation we're in.

In which case, I have to suggest that you are actually grumbling *at* God. If you believe in a God who is sovereign over every aspect of this world ... If you go along with the sentiments of the hymn that says ...

*Since all that I meet shall work for my good  
The bitter is sweet, the medicine is food*

... then isn't a grumble directed at God, challenging his wisdom or his love in subjecting us to this circumstance? Insisting that there is no good and sufficient purpose that he could be working though it? Implying that *he* is either incompetent or remiss in the expression of his care for you?

Next time we catch ourselves grumbling - which we will, for it really is a very human failing - I challenge you (and myself) to try to stop and analyse it in those terms. In which way am I actually implying that God has let me down? If, in my right mind, I don't dare do that ... what should I do instead? Maybe another hymn:

*Were half the breath thus vainly spent  
to heav'n in supplication sent,  
our cheerful song would oft'ner be,  
"Hear what the Lord hath done for me!"*

That's a fair point, I think. Worth trying to turn into a habit, with the help of the Holy Spirit - don't think I'm just trying to teach self-improvement techniques here! But right now it's really time to get back into our passage and press on, now we've got that basic point established. So they were grumbling *at* Moses.

***And he cried to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a log, and he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet.***

(Exodus 15:25)

And I've heard it suggested that this is just science beyond Moses' knowledge. It's possible, yes, that that log contains some natural chemicals that could pull out the metal ions in the water that were causing the vile taste. But I think it's also fair to say that, even if we're not thinking a vast lush oasis here - and it sounds as if it would a lot smaller than Elim, a couple of verses later - are there enough of these supposed chemicals in this single log to cleanse the whole pool?

So I'm not convinced that this potential input from more modern science can just explain away what is going on here. You have *at least* the intervention of God telling Moses which log to go for - or you have a miracle. The first of many, actually, as we read on ... so what's so wrong with thinking of this as a miracle, too?

And now we come to a rule which is also a promise:

***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)

First of all here, can you see a principle here about following God - the test that is being put before the people here. There are two stages: i) **listen**, ii) **do**. Or, as it's repeated here, **give ear, keep**. It's really quite simple. That's what God wants from you every time you read or hear his word. Listen up, and then do what it says. Why do we make things so much more complicated whenever we can?

But I'm going to say that we're not going into the complex and controversial topic of Divine Healing right now. There are some things that are not so straightforward - and not as straightforward as we might like, too. So the whole of that discussion I'm going to move along to this evening's cafe church. But it is certainly worth thinking through, not the least because Christians have come to some very intensely-held *and opposing* viewpoints on this subject. There as a book published a few decades back, making reference to this verse: **None of these diseases**

First of all, you'd have to get straight whether "these diseases" were just the ones that came as part of those ten plagues - in which case, you might say, it's not a big deal of a promise. Or were they diseases that a somehow generically unhealthy Egyptian society was subject to ... and again, in this case too, how much of a promise is it? So what are we to make of "I am the LORD, your healer"? Is it a statement of promise? Or is it another special name by which God is now revealing himself?

Whichever, the people move on again, and the first leg of this wilderness journey comes to a conclusion.

***Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees, and they encamped there by the water.***

(Exodus 15:27)

I think we will find that they encamped there for some time, actually. Until ...

- **Stage 2: bread from heaven**

***They set out from Elim, and all the congregation of the people of Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt.***

(Exodus 16:1)

Remember that God had reset the calendar when they left Egypt with that first Passover. So I'm guessing that this implies that they must have spent several weeks, perhaps a bit more, at that rather lush oasis of Elim - which is why one brand of churches chose the name, quite possibly.

But God moves them on. And life becomes difficult again. And this time we're told there is a more immediate response:

***And the whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, ...***

(Exodus 16:2)

This time we've got much more in the way of specifics, too:

***... 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 16:3)

And doesn't it strike you there just what stupid comments these are? Actually, I wonder if the sheer stupidity of some grumbles is what makes it so difficult for those on the receiving end to stand it. I mean, seriously? Not that long ago crying out for liberation from the cruel bondage as slaves in Egypt, but now those are the **Good Old Days**?? Sirloin steak and full bellies every night? I somehow doubt it! Moses and Aaron secretly plotting genocide all along? ... tempting though that might be, at some moments!

We once had a woman threatening to leave our previous church, because, she said, the elders were "overlording it". Our sin had been that one of us had brought **two pints of milk** to a church social, when she thought it had been down to her to bring the milk! It sounds totally ridiculous now, years later. Actually, it did to us at the time, but this woman was in a total strop and deadly serious with her accusation.

Folks, stop and think. When we are grumbling and implying that someone else is some kind of fool, who are the ones that are *really* looking foolish? Who will be remembered as the idiots, in later years? Believing stuff that was obvious total nonsense. Or, that particularly pernicious one that we see here, claiming to *know* someone else's motives. Half the time I'm not sure about all my *own* mixed motives for doing some things - so how *you* can be so sure, I don't know ... but can you please sell me the recipe?

Here, it looks as if God just intervenes, as the account moves along. Here is an answer to that accusation. They wanted their fill of meat again ... so OK, here's a *real* feast flying in.

***Then the LORD said to Moses, "Behold, I am about to rain bread from heaven for you, ..."***

(Exodus 16:4)

But there's an interesting little catch here. This is going to be a two-part feast. What looks like an initial deluge will be just a preparatory starter - and then the real test will begin as the regular provision kicks into gear.

***"... and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in my law or not. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather daily."***

(Exodus 16:4-5)

But there is some serious talking first.

Earlier on, that initial grumbling had been overlooked. This time, it needs to be tackled, challenged ... rebuked. And I think I see here three points being repeatedly made in this passage. First, as we've seen, we make ourselves look stupid. But here are two more coming up.

***So Moses and Aaron said to all the people of Israel, "At evening you shall know that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and in the morning you shall see the glory of the LORD, ..."***

(Exodus 16:6-7)

This is God making a statement, I think.

***"... because he has heard your grumbling against the LORD."***

(Exodus 16:7)

Did you notice the change? A moment ago we're told that the people grumble against Moses and Aaron. *God* takes the microphone now and announces that that is not how he sees it. They are grumbling against *him*. Just in case they don't get it the first time, it's repeated twice:

***"... because the LORD has heard your grumbling that you grumble against him ... Your grumbling is not against us but against the LORD."***

(Exodus 16:8)

Folks, here's our second point: it's not just that we make ourselves look like idiots by the stupid comments we make when we grumble, but here's a bigger reason that we must get a grip and seek to change here: grumbles target God. They imply that you think *he* is somehow treating you unfairly. Even if we are talking manifest injustice - worthy of an official complaint - that attitude of inner discontent labels is an accusation we place upon God himself.

And a third point: so human beings fail us and disappoint us? What did we expect? Precisely what Moses and Aaron imply to these people:

***"For what are we, that you grumble against us?" ... "... you grumble against him — what are we?"***

(Exodus 16:7-8)

Folks, expect your leaders to disappoint you, to be imperfect, to not always live up to the standard you think they should, to sometimes just simply not know stuff or simply to forget stuff. "What are we?" We're exactly like you - and we need as much slack cut *us* as you would always insist that people cut *you*.



One more point I'd have to add here, though not from this passage, is that grumbling is un-Christlike. Remember that Jesus is not just our Saviour, but also our example. What do you remember of the *speech* of Jesus, in general terms? Do you remember any grumbling?

***... Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.***

(1 Peter 2:21-23)

I'm going to skip right down to the end of our passage in Exodus now, in conclusion. That stuff about the quail and the manna, we can revisit this evening. We might want to think what that teaches us about how God can provide for us - by just natural means at miraculous timings, or by something that looks a lot more like a miracle.

And we can think this evening about why it is that people didn't take God at his word about when the manna would and wouldn't be there - and how this section about the Sabbath might still apply to us nowadays.

But at the end of the chapter, we read this about that manna stuff:

***The people of Israel ate the manna forty years, till they came to a habitable land. They ate the manna till they came to the border of the land of Canaan.***

(Exodus 16:35)

And Jesus makes concerning the passage we've been reading through. There is a contrast between what happened to those people back in the wilderness, and what we are presented with today.

John records Jesus saying these words soon after he records Jesus feeding the 5000. And it looks as if people wanted another miraculous banquet along the same lines. Only Jesus says,

***"Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you."***

(John 6:27)

But people will not take his word for this. They want proof. Signs.

***So they said to him, "Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform? Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'"***

(John 6:30-31)

Jesus says that manna is a picture of himself. There are similarities that we shouldn't miss:

***Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; ... For I have come down from heaven, ..."***

(John 6:35,38)

And it wasn't *Moses* who gave those people long ago the manna, it was *God* who sent the "bread from heaven" - just as it is *God* who now sends his *son* into the world, as the Bread of Life.

But as well as the similarities, there are differences:

***"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."***

(John 6:48-51)

But hold on a moment. "This bread" ... that's just a picture, a symbol. What is Jesus saying we should do. I want to give you three answers, which first of all look very different, but which I think are the same thing, just phrased very differently. One answer is the words that immediately follow. Another is the repeated thought through the whole passage. And the final one puts it as an invitation to us. Here they are, side by side.

***"And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.... Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."***

(John 6:51,54)

Not, I'm sure, taking part in Holy Communion. Looking to the sacrifice that is going to be made when that bread of life is *broken* for us. The second answer: believing:

***"Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life."***

(John 6:47)

And what's that? *Coming*. Useful to think of that the other way around, too. If someone says they want to "come to Christ", but doesn't know how, how can you explain it? Tell them it's the same as believing, putting your trust in this Jesus. You can see the clear parallel in this final verse:

***"I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst."***

(John 6:35)

Folks, this is the even greater message I want you to take home from this passage about the manna in the wilderness. Yes, the stuff about grumbling is important. But if you feel convicted about that, remember that we have a Saviour from our sins. Far better to confess our sin and be forgiven, according to God's promise, than try to minimise it and pretend it's not really much of a sin at all, just a human weakness.

But I never want to major more on any sin than on Jesus Christ our Saviour from sin, and hell, and death, and maybe even some stuff we don't yet realise we need to be saved from. Because Jesus this,

***"This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like the bread the fathers ate, and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever."***

(John 6:58)

Feed on him.  
Come to him.  
Believe in him.

And start enjoying eternal life *now*.