

## **“The Story of Manna: The Provision of Grace”**

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*[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, [www.welovethegospel.com](http://www.welovethegospel.com).]*

Take your Bible and meet me in Exodus 16...

Last week we began considering the story of manna from the wilderness wanderings of the Israelites after their departure from Egypt. We saw the people of Israel engaging in what was their besetting sin—complaining. And we considered how we too have a tendency to grumble for much the same reasons. So last week we explored, “The Problem of Grumbling,” noting that our complaining is characteristically absurd, born out of our sinful hearts, and always directed at God (whether realize it or not). It was a convicting sermon for all of us, but well worth the discomfort. If you missed it, you can find it on our newly redesigned website ([www.welovethegospel.com](http://www.welovethegospel.com)).

Today we will examine the same story and discover that God responds to the problem of grumbling with the provision of grace. Let’s skip ahead a little in the story and pick things up in verse 9. Follow along as I read. This is the Word of God...

*<sup>9</sup> Then Moses said to Aaron, ‘Say to the whole congregation of the people of Israel, “Come near before the LORD, for he has heard your grumbling.”’<sup>10</sup> And 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 the cloud.<sup>11</sup> And the LORD said to Moses, <sup>12</sup> ‘I have heard the grumbling of the people of Israel. Say to them, “At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread. Then you shall know that I am the LORD your God.”’<sup>13</sup> In the evening quail came up and covered the camp, and in the morning dew lay around the camp.<sup>14</sup> And when the dew had gone up, there was on the face of the wilderness a fine, flake-like thing, fine as frost on the ground.<sup>15</sup> When the people of Israel saw it, they said to one another, ‘What is it?’ For they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them, ‘It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat.’<sup>16</sup> This is what the LORD has commanded: “Gather of it, each one of you, as much as he can eat. You shall each take an omer, according to the number of the persons that each of you has in his tent.”’<sup>17</sup> And the people of Israel did so. They gathered, some more, some less.<sup>18</sup> But when they measured it with an omer, whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack. Each of them gathered as much as he could eat.<sup>19</sup> And Moses said to them, ‘Let no one leave any of it over till the morning.’<sup>20</sup> But they did not listen to Moses. Some left part of it till the morning, and it bred worms and stank. And Moses was angry with them.<sup>21</sup> Morning by morning they gathered it, each as much as he could eat; but when the sun grew hot, it melted.” (Exodus 16:9-21)*

### **The Provision of Grace**

One of the most amazing things about this passage is the fact that God responds to the grumbling of His people with grace. The people are ready to write God off because He has not done what they wanted and yet God doesn’t destroy them on the spot for their ingratitude. He shows them grace. It’s an incredible picture of the graciousness of God. We can detect His grace in this passage in at least three ways. First, there is...

### *The Grace of God Paying Attention*

Did you notice the repetition in the verses we read? On four occasions the text highlights the fact that God “heard” the Israelites. We see it emphasized in verses 7, 8, 9, and 12. Have you ever been in a situation where you were complaining about someone and then you look over your shoulder and discover that they have been listening to everything you said? Awkward. Something similar is happening in this scene. The Israelites have been complaining and then Moses informs them that God has heard all those complaints. He’s been listening.

The fact that God hears us is something of a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it can be a little scary. Nothing escapes His ear. There is nothing we say or do that He doesn’t hear and see. He even knows the thoughts and intentions of our hearts. As the last verse in Ecclesiastes reminds us, “*God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil*” (Ecclesiastes 12:14).<sup>1</sup> There are no private moments. Every moment of every day we live *coram Deo*, an expression that means “before the face of God.”

But, on the other hand, knowing that God hears can be an encouraging reality. He heard their cries. He could hear their stomach’s growling in the desert. Even though the Israelites didn’t believe God would meet their needs, God knew their needs and had a plan to meet them. He hears. And He hears our cries as well. God’s people never have to wonder if our prayers are falling on deaf ears. They never are. We have access to God through the blood of Jesus Christ. His work on our behalf means, in the words of Hebrews 4:16, that we can “*with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*” God hears. He pays attention to us. And He responds to His people’s cries with grace and mercy. This leads us to the next grace...

### *The Grace of God’s Providence*

Two physical things that God provides His people with in this scene—quail and manna. Quail is a kind of bird that is common in the Middle East. They are low flying, migratory birds and each year they pass through the Sinai Peninsula in the spring and fall. When they rest, they roost on the ground, making them easy to catch with nets or even by hand when they were tired from their migration. Herodotus, who was a Greek historian, said that the Egyptians considered the bird a delicacy.<sup>2</sup> The Israelites enjoyed that fine delicacy in the wilderness (something they probably only dreamed about eating when they were slaves in Egypt).

Manna, on the other hand, was certainly something the Israelites had never encountered. Verse 14 connects it to the dew and describes it as “*a fine, flake-like thing, fine as frost on the ground.*” They ask each other, “Is this gluten free?” Not really. They actually ask, “What is it?” and Moses says, “*It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat*” (16:15, 16). One of the Psalms calls it “*bread from heaven*” (Psalm 105:40).<sup>3</sup> Another Psalm calls it, “*the bread of the angels*” (78:25), or as I like to call it—“angel food cake.” Want another one? “The original Wonder Bread”<sup>4</sup> (Don’t worry about me quitting my day job!). But seriously, we’re told in verse 31 that “*It was like coriander seed, white, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey.*” Sounds delicious. And that verse also tells us that the Israelites named it “*manna,*” which actually rhymes with the question they asked in Hebrew—“*What is it?*” A mysterious name for a mysterious food.

But there are three things I want you to recognize about these provisions. They were supernatural, sufficient, and sanctifying.<sup>5</sup> Let me explain. First of all, they were supernatural. That’s worth stating because, as with all the miracles in the Exodus story, there have been a plethora of natural explanations that have been

posited by scholars and skeptics over the years. For instance, F. S. Bodheimer has claimed, that this was the “liquid honeydew excretion of a number of cicada, plant lice, and scale insects [speedily solidifying] by rapid evaporation...resulting [in a] sticky and often granular masses”.<sup>6</sup> That doesn’t sound very appetizing? Plant lice droppings. Eeww. Another suggestion is that this so-called manna was just lichen growing on rocks that was sweet on the tongue when eaten.<sup>7</sup> Probably the most popular of these suggestions right now is the one put forth by Göran Larsson, who connects manna with the tamarisk (a kind of tree or shrub with scaly leaves).<sup>8</sup>

But there are some problems with suggestions like these. The first is that the Israelites seemed mystified by what they were seeing, so it’s hard to believe that these were just common phenomena in the region they had spent hundreds of years living in and around. Additionally, these explanations don’t fit the biblical data. The various excretions don’t just fade away on a daily basis like this manna did. They are seasonal phenomenon. And how many trillions of plant lice would it take to feed an entire nation for even a day, let alone be the staple of a nation’s diet for decades? Look at verse 35.

*“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)<sup>9</sup>*

Those natural explanations can’t account for this. And even if God used some natural means, the convergence of all of those means at that precise moment of need and for that duration, through the various annual seasons of Sinai, was something supernatural. The fact that manna was there every morning, ready to be gathered, defies natural explanation. It was a miracle. Even the quail, which only happened on one other occasion, happened miraculously as it rained down at the right moment in time and in the right location they were needed, precisely when God told them to expect the food to be delivered.<sup>10</sup> That’s incredible.

But these provisions were not just supernatural. They were also sufficient. Did you notice that verse 16 said that each was to gather, “*as much he can eat*”? Verse 18 reiterates the point. They were “*filled with bread*” (16:12). No one went hungry. They each had enough every morning. Never too much. Never too little. Always enough. So they are told not to hoard it for future days, because God will provide for their need each day. Paul actually cites verse 18 in 2 Corinthians 8:15 to encourage the Corinthians to give generously and not hoard the gifts of God. He was encouraging the church to trust the Lord for our sufficiency, that we might bless others with our resources instead of hoarding them until they one day fade away like manna. We don’t always have everything that we want. But isn’t it amazing that when we trust God, we always seem to have enough for our needs (our needs, not our greeds)? I’m reminded of Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount:

*“Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’<sup>32</sup> For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all.<sup>33</sup> But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.” (Matthew 6:31-33)*

God will meet our needs as we seek first His kingdom and His righteousness. We can be generous. And we can be free from anxiety because the same God who faithfully provided for the Israelites each morning will faithfully provide for His children.

And these provisions were not just supernatural and sufficient. They were also sanctifying, by which I mean that they were about more than food. God was meeting a spiritual need they had. He was using these provisions to cultivate faith in His people. He’s teaching them that He can be trusted and they can wait on Him. He’s teaching them contentment. He’s teaching them to walk in obedience. He’s teaching them relationship. The manna had a sanctifying purpose. Years later, Moses reflected on this with the next

generation, explaining that though the manna was a physical miracle, like all miracles, it was educational, intended to teach a spiritual lesson.

*“And you shall remember the whole way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. <sup>3</sup> And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.”*  
(Deuteronomy 8:2-3; cf. Matthew 4:4)

God doesn't waste our experiences, even the difficult ones. They have a purpose. They have been sifted through the hands of a sovereign God and will be orchestrated for the good of His people in the end. He will use them to grow us up into spiritual maturity, as we trust Him along the journey. The challenges and tests of our lives are the means by which God works in us spiritual maturity. The wilderness is the university. It's the operating table where God exposes the decay of our heart and applies the scalpel of His skilled hand. It reminds me of the old hymn, by John Newton...

“I asked the Lord that I might grow  
In faith, and love, and every grace;  
Might more of His salvation know,  
And seek, more earnestly, His face.

‘Twas He who taught me thus to pray,  
And He, I trust, has answered prayer!  
But it has been in such a way,  
As almost drove me to despair.

I hoped that in some favored hour,  
At once He'd answer my request;  
And by His love's constraining pow'r,  
Subdue my sins, and give me rest.

Instead of this, He made me feel  
The hidden evils of my heart;  
And let the angry pow'rs of hell  
Assault my soul in every part.

Yea more, with His own hand He seemed  
Intent to aggravate my woe;  
Crossed all the fair designs I schemed,  
Blasted my gourds, and laid me low.

Lord, why is this, I trembling cried,  
Wilt thou pursue thy worm to death?  
‘Tis in this way,’ the Lord replied,  
‘I answer prayer for grace and faith.

These inward trials I employ,  
From self, and pride, to set thee free;  
And break thy schemes of earthly joy,  
That thou may'st find thy all in Me.”

A similar lesson plan was at work in the wilderness of Exodus 16. “While their minds were obsessed with food, God had something bigger in mind—their hearts.”<sup>11</sup> That supernatural and sufficient manna was meant to sanctify God’s people, that they might come to see that God was their true sufficiency. Have you considered that God’s provisions in your life are meant to point you Godward in much the same way?

Now let’s consider one other grace we see in this text. Not just the grace of God’s paying attention to and providing for sinners like us, but we also see...

### *The Grace of God’s Patience*

If there is one thing that stands out to me in this story it is the patience of God. I recognize how impatient I can be with people for minor inconveniences that pale in comparison to the offense of Israel’s grumbling and yet God is so patient with them. And in light of our own propensity to grumble (which we explored last week), we should add that God is so patient with us as well. How often do we forget or fail to see the alarming frequency that God has exercised His extreme patience on our behalf?<sup>12</sup>

The patience of God is such a marvelous attribute to meditate on, as I have spent some time doing this week. You cannot do so for long before you are confounded by the question, “Why has God been so patient *with me*?” God’s patience has been every bit as on display in my life as it has been in the lives of these Israelites and, if given time to reflect, you would likely make a similar confession. It’s actually quite overwhelming a thought once it sets in. God is so patient with sinners. So patient with me.

But why? There are several possible answers. Peter, for example, wrote,

*“But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. <sup>9</sup> The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.”* (2 Peter 3:8-9)

So God’s patience is for the sake of His future mercy. As one theologian put it several centuries ago, “Goodness sets God upon the exercise of patience, and patience sets many a sinner on running into the arms of mercy.”<sup>13</sup> No sinner can be saved apart from the patience of God. We all deserve to be wiped out on the spot for sin, but God restrains that judgment that we might repent and believe the Gospel. The patience of God affords sinners that opportunity. It introduces time for us to trust in the saving work of Christ, who died for our sins and raised for our justification.

But more fundamentally the patience of God is about His glory. When God puts His glorious patience on display He is glorifying Himself. We sometimes associate patience with weakness. But that’s not necessarily the case and in God’s case it’s quite the opposite in fact. God’s patience is not weakness. It’s a picture of His absolute strength. This is a thought that was new to me this past week. I was reading a devotional on God’s patience by Mark Jones in which he said something I had never really considered.

*“God does not need to be in a rush. His patience is his power, and when he exercises the former, he shows more of the latter than he would if he created thousands of worlds. How? Creating worlds shows a power over creatures and matter; exercising patience shows power over himself.”<sup>14</sup>*

I had never really considered that. The vastness of God’s creation is such a strong statement of His power. That we know. It might cause us to think, “Who could possibly thwart a God who has the power do such amazing things? Who could stay His hand?” And the answer is no one. No one, that is, except God Himself.

And in the exercise of His patience that is what is happening. The most powerful being is being restrained. In that way, it's difficult to imagine a more significant display of power than what we see in God's patience toward sinners.

But His patience is not just a reminder of His power. It's a reminder of His absolute knowledge. God's "complete power and exhaustive knowledge explain why God can exercise such patience."<sup>15</sup> Here again, Jones is insightful:

"God is patient with us because he does not need to worry about us. He knows, without any hint of anxiety, how all things will work out. When we as finite creatures are impatient, however, we sometimes show anxiety and frustration about the outcome. God knows the outcome of our sanctification not only in this life but also in the life to come. He may allow us to take one step backward for the moment if he knows we will take two steps forward in the future. This never justifies our sin, but it does manifest his forbearance to us while sin remains."<sup>16</sup>

So God's patience exists because of His absolute power and His absolute knowledge. His patience puts those attributes on display to the glory of His name.

Someone may wonder, "If God has absolute knowledge and He therefore knows that some sinner will never repent and cry out to Jesus for salvation, then why go on exercising patience toward that sinner? Why not just get rid of him so that he can not do so much damage in the world?" God may have different reasons in different cases. Romans 9, for instance, suggests that often God's reason has to do with glorifying Himself through the ultimate judgment of that sinner. Paul says, "*What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make know the riches of his glory to the vessels of mercy, which he prepared beforehand for glory...?*" (Romans 9:22-23). So that could be one explanation.

But God's patience towards sinners He knows will never repent also serves to grow the church as well. Godly men and women sometimes spring from the loins of ungodly men and women. For example, one of Israel's most evil kings, Ahaz, fathered one of her most godly, Hezekiah. God's patience with Ahaz, in other words, paved the way for His mercy and revival through Hezekiah. And, if you really think about it, how many saints could there really be on earth or in heaven if God did not show patience with sinners He knew would never be converted. We all have people in our genealogy who were not believers. So perhaps God's patience with them was, in part, for your sake. What grace. That's probably grace that you have received unknowingly and never even considered until this moment.

But I want you to see something else about God's patience in this story. We are told back in verse 4 that God is supplying this manna as a "test" to help them to learn obedience. It's a test. So He gives them very clear and specific directions. "This is how much you gather. It will be enough. Don't gather more. Don't hoard it. I will supply the next day too, so just trust that it will be there and do what you're told." Easy enough. Yet still there were some that did not listen. Verse 20 says some gathered extra and "*left part of it till the morning, and it bred worms and stank.*" They failed the test. It was a simple test. Could not have been easier. God gave them the answers and told them that they would get more the next day. But they still found a way to flunk the test.

But here is the beautiful thing. Once they got rid of the maggoty bread and even before they could get the smell of it out of their nostrils, they would open their tent, breath in the morning air, and look out and see that there was more manna, fresh and desirable, just waiting for the taking. Isn't that amazing? They fail the test and yet in the morning, it's as though God was saying, "Let's try again."<sup>17</sup> Don't you love second chances? "Brush yourself off. Throw aside the rotten stuff and walk into my new provisions. Let's try again. This time trust me. This time walk by faith. This time don't try to do things your way, but walk this way

instead.” And they did. Until the day that they didn’t (cf. 16:27ff). But God gave them a new morning and said, “Let’s try again. Walk by faith. Take my hand. Let me show grace and mercy this morning.” They fail the test. And God remained patient. What grace! What mercy! What a God!

I’m not saying we get unlimited chances. We don’t. But any chance is more than we deserve. And every single one of us has been given more chances than we can count. And we fail. Again and again we fail to walk by faith. But if God gives you a new morning tomorrow, there is a new opportunity to set aside the rotten remains of your sinful way and step forward in faith trusting in the Lord. He’s a loving Father. I can’t tell you how many times one of my kids has had a rough day that ended with them in tears and dad at the bedside saying, “I love you. What you did was wrong. But tomorrow is a new day. You’re going to sleep tonight and wake up tomorrow and find that Daddy still loves you and we are going to try again. Together, we are going to try again.” And I cannot tell you how many times I have felt God at my bedside assuring my soul with some similar consolation. “It’s a new day. Let’s try again son. Only this time, don’t try to take matters into your own hands and walk by your own strength. Walk by My strength. Follow me today. I have something to teach you. Let’s try this again...”

Don’t you just love our God. He is so much better than an I deserve. I’ll close with the words of Psalm 103, extoling His virtue...

*“He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel. <sup>8</sup> The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. <sup>9</sup> He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever. <sup>10</sup> He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. <sup>11</sup> For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; <sup>12</sup> as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. <sup>13</sup> As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him.” (Psalm 103:7-14)*

Let’s pray...

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Hebrews 4:12-13; Psalm 139; 1 Chronicles 28:9.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Ryken, *Exodus: Saved for God's Glory* (PTW; Wheaton: Crossway, 2005), 426.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Psalm 78:24.

<sup>4</sup> Ryken, 427.

<sup>5</sup> I adopted that alliteration from Tony Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Exodus* (Christ-Centered Exposition; Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 97-99.

<sup>6</sup> F. S. Bodenheimer, "The Manna of Sinai," *Biblical Archaeologist*, Vol. 10 (1947), 1-6.

<sup>7</sup> See John J. Davis, *Moses and the Gods of Egypt: Studies in the Book of Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1971), 181.

<sup>8</sup> "Particularly in rainy years the tamarisk bush, indigenous to arid areas, is invaded by a species of plant louse. The insect sucks the sap and transforms its carbohydrates into a variety of high fructose products. These are secreted through the body and fall to the ground as small drops. There they crystallize into small white pellets, which can be consumed like sugar or honey. Since they melt in the sun, they have to be gathered early in the morning, just like the biblical manna. Still today the bedouins call them in Arabic *man*, which corresponds to the Hebrew word for 'manna.'" Göran Larsson, *Bound for Freedom: The Book of Exodus in Jewish and Christian Traditions* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1999), 115 (cited in Ryken, 427).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Joshua 5:12

<sup>10</sup> See Number 11:31.

<sup>11</sup> Mike Wilkerson, *Redemption: Freed by Jesus from the Idols We Worship and the Wounds We Carry* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 105.

<sup>12</sup> From a sermon by David Strain, called, "Bread from Heaven – Part 1," preached on March 22, 2015, to First Presbyterian Church of Jackson, Mississippi.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, in *The Works of Stephen Charnock* (1864; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2010), 2:504.

<sup>14</sup> Mark Jones, *God Is: A Devotional Guide to the Attributes of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), 145.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>17</sup> Inspired by an illustration by Timothy Keller in a sermon called, "Food in the Desert," preached on October 13, 2002.