



TRANSITIONS: TRUSTING GOD IN TIMES OF CHANGE WILDERNESS PROVISION

Exodus 16:1-36

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Introduction

When Jesus said to his disciples, “do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on” (Matt. 6:25), he was putting his finger on a universal human need—the need for provision.

In this series, we’ve been reflecting on transitions. Surely one of the great challenges with any transition is dealing with the anxiety of whether God will provide for you. Will God be God to me during this time of wilderness transition? Will he show himself reliable in the midst of all this flux and fluidity? Can I really lean on him, when all around me I have nothing else to lean on?

Often times the challenge has to do with *how* God provides for us in the midst of our time of wilderness transition? We want to take up this question today. This passage addresses this question in some surprising and encouraging and indeed challenging ways.

God’s Provision Comes Sometimes Despite Our Grumbling (16:1-5)

The first thing we learn about God’s provision is perhaps the most remarkable. *Sometimes God’s provision comes to us despite our grumbling.*

It is certainly encouraging to think that God will provide for us even when we fail to ask him to provide for us. It is truly remarkable, however, to think that God will provide for us even when we have been badmouthing him for his failure to provide for us.

Yet we know this is how God sometimes responds to his people. In Exodus 16 we’re told that the Israelites moved on from Elim, the place of provision the Lord brought them after their despairing of a lack of water to drink (cf. 15:22-24), further south into the barren and harsh wilderness. According to this passage, they were only a month into their wilderness wandering; just thirty days earlier they’d seen those terrible Ten Plagues upon Egypt and the Lord’s parting of the Red Sea and glorious triumph over Pharaoh and his hordes (cf. 14:1-31). Yet Israel changes her tune dramatically from singing to grumbling.

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. ² And the whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, . . .

As if the grumbling were not itself sufficiently obnoxious, the Israelites go on to add injury to insult by beating up on Moses and Aaron, their leaders.

... 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."

Not only then, do the Israelites have the audacity to bellyache about their lack of food, but they don't even have the guts to take their complaint to the person ultimately responsible for their present circumstances: *not Moses, to whom they complain, but the Lord, who is sovereign over their circumstances.*

Of course, Moses shrewdly points this out, and thus points their criticism away from himself and, whether they recognize it or not, toward the person they're really criticizing: "the Lord has heard your grumbling that you grumble against him—what are we? Your grumbling is not against us but against the Lord" (16:8).

Now, if you or I were in the Lord's shoes at this point, how might we have responded to this kind of bellyaching? How do you respond to your children when they grumble about not being able to have a cookie after you've just taken them out for a movie and ice cream? Or how do you respond when your friend calls to complain that you've not called or texted for several days, when you just got done throwing her a huge surprise birthday party a week earlier? Or how do you react when your employee complains about the long hours he's putting in, after you've just given him a ten percent raise in his pay?

How would you feel? Annoyed? Angry? Indignant? Understandably so, because there are few things more morally offensive than ingratitude. And because of this, we would feel justified in telling our children to button it or our friend to buzz off or our employee to take a hike.

In light of all the sovereign Lord has already done for Israel in bringing her out of Egypt, you might expect him to do the same. Yet what we find in response to the Israelites' grumbling in the wilderness is something quite different.

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Behold, I am about to rain bread from heaven for you, and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day . . .

Rather than being annoyed, grace. Rather than punishment, provision. Rather than rebuking the Israelites, the Lord will *rain down* bread upon this grumbling bunch.

What an astonishing flash of grace in the midst of this wilderness transition! So astonishing that as good an exegete as John Calvin is, even he has trouble taking what this text says at face value. Surely Moses omits an important detail. Calvin writes: "It is probable that Moses passes over much in silence, because it is not consistent that the insolence of the people was left without even a single word of chastisement."¹

Not even a single word of chastisement. Calvin is quite right: it is not consistent with the insolence of the people that God would just pass over their insolence and ingratitude in silence. Yet where Calvin sees silence, I see a loud affirmation of the grace of God. For I think the whole point of the narrative is to demonstrate that God's wilderness provision comes sometimes despite our grumbling, sometimes not even a single word of chastisement. Now that is what you call grace! "If anyone needs convincing of the grace of God in the Old Testament," as one Old Testament scholar has rightly said, "they need only to look here!"²

¹ Calvin, *Harmony of Exodus*, p. 270.

² Peter Enns, *Exodus*, p. 324.

Now, believing that God sometimes provides for us even despite our grumbling against him does not of course excuse our grumbling. Are we to continue to grumble that provision may abound? By no means! How can we who have received the provision of the Lord still grumble any longer? Instead, seeing God's faithfulness toward us, despite our faithlessness toward him, ought to melt the hardness of our hearts, humble us in the face of our own fickleness, and cause us to adore the greatness of God's mercy and kindness in providing for us despite our grumbling against him. Sometimes God's provision comes to us despite our grumbling.

God's Provision Comes as an Expression of His Character (16:6-12)

But how can God be so good? How can he be so generous, so gracious? How can a righteous God, who despises ingratitude and grumbling, show this kind of grace and patience in the face of rebellion? Not only that, but how can he still richly provide for an ungrateful people?

God is able to provide for us despite our not deserving it because his provision is ultimately not a response to who we are; his provision is ultimately an *expression* of who he is. This is the second lesson about wilderness provision in this passage, and it is not only the most profound but the most important point. *God's provision comes to us as an expression of his character.*

This is why Moses says that when the Lord rains down bread from heaven, the Israelites will then see the manifestation of God's character, God's glory.

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, ⁷ and in the morning you shall see the glory of the LORD, because he has heard your grumbling against the LORD. For what are we, that you grumble against us?" (16:6-7).

For the provision of manna in the morning is an expression of the glory of God, a manifestation of the character of God, a revelation of who God is in himself.

So, you see, God's provision of bread in the wilderness is not *ultimately* contingent upon Israel—but upon God. Yes, he heard their grumbling. He nevertheless provides for them. And in this way God preserves the freedom of his grace and mercy. He does not tie himself down to their faithfulness or faithlessness. In a word, God's grace does not depend upon you—otherwise it would not be grace!

God's grace is instead an overflow of who God is in himself. He is the fount of every blessing, and he does not depend upon your thirst to cause him to overflow. He just overflows, in streams of mercy, never ceasing, by virtue of who he is in himself: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Beware, then, of taking too much credit for the blessings in your life. Beware of thinking the provision you see in your life is because of the way you've lived your life. Beware of thinking that your kids have turned out well because you raised them so well; or your business has turned out well because you lead it so well. These may ultimately have less to do with you, and more to do with him. These may be expressions of his character, and not responses to yours.

Also, recognize that every ounce of provision you receive is an expression of the glory of God. Whether it is the food on your table or the clothes on your back, the health of your body or the grace in your heart—these are all, everyone of them, expressions of the character of God, his glory.

So, too, recognize, as C. S. Lewis put it, that every ounce of provision that comes your way should be received as a sunbeam, which ought then to be traced back to its source in the sun,

thus turning every provision into an opportunity for adoration, for worship.³ This is what it would mean to truly believe and live in light of this second lesson about wilderness provision: that God's provision comes to us as an expression of his character.

God's Provision Comes One Day at a Time (16:13-21)

Perhaps at this point the thought occurs to you that if God's provision is an expression of his character, then why does he not want to express *more* of himself and give me all the provision I need all at once. This is a fair question, and one that leads to our third lesson about wilderness provision from this passage. Which is this: *God's provision typically comes to us one day at a time.*

This was how the Lord provided for Israel during those forty long years in the wilderness: day by day, one day at a time. Not that he couldn't have provided forty years worth of food in an instance; this is after all the God who created the heavens and the earth with a single word. It wasn't for a lack of ability. Nor was it because the Lord is stingy with his people, like a miserly old man who only gives what is absolutely necessary to give—and not a dollar more!

God's provision comes one day at a time not because he is unable or unwilling to provide. No, he chooses to provide for his us one day at a time so that we will learn to trust him one day at a time. He wants to test us: that is, to teach us, to cause us to grow in our reliance upon him. That is why he doles out his provision, not all at once, but one day at a time.

So we read in Exodus 16:4 that when the Lord rains down provision from heaven, 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.” Because the Lord had committed to provide for them day by day, every day, the Israelites were in turn to trust the Lord for his provision by not gathering more than they needed on each day. The Lord explicitly instructed them to not gather more than they needed or save some for the next day.

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.’ (16:16).

The Israelites were not, then, as a rule, to stockpile manna! Otherwise it would stink and grow worms on it, as it did for some of the Israelites who failed to listen to Moses (see 16:20). Instead, every day was to be a new day, and every day the Israelites had to ask anew for their daily bread. They weren't to rely upon the provision at the Red Sea to get them through the waterless wilderness. They couldn't count on yesterday's miracle to supply for today's need. Instead, they needed to rely upon daily provision, daily bread.

So, too, we are taught by the Lord Jesus to pray. And that when we pray, we are to ask the Lord to “give us this day our daily bread” (Matt. 6:11). We are to pray for provision sufficient for the day, and then learn to be content with that. But are you trying to make it through today with yesterday's provision? The Lord calls you—the Lord in his grace invites you—to turn to him day by day. For the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness (Lam. 3:22).

³ C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm*, pp. 89-90.

God's Provision Comes That We Might Have Rest (16:22-36)

God's provision comes, then, one day at a time. This is an important truth about God's provision during times of wilderness transition. Yet this is not the whole truth, or at least not the whole story.

Sometimes God provides more than we need so that we might have rest. Sometimes God gives a double portion of provision in order that we have not only what we need for today, but what we need for tomorrow as well. And he does so, not that we might become complacent—but that we might find rest in the abundance of his provision.

The Israelites were to gather manna six days a week. This was the basic pattern of their existence in the wilderness. But there was the seventh day, the Sabbath. And on the seventh day, they were not to gather manna.

But how were they to eat on the seventh day if they weren't to gather food? God promised to provide a double portion for them on the sixth day so that on the seventh, they could rest and not work for their food.

On the sixth day they gathered twice as much bread, two omers each. And when all the leaders of the congregation came and told Moses, ²³ he said to them, "This is what the LORD has commanded: 'Tomorrow is a day of solemn rest, a holy Sabbath to the LORD; bake what you will bake and boil what you will boil, and all that is left over lay aside to be kept till the morning.'" ²⁴ So they laid it aside till the morning, as Moses commanded them, and it did not stink, and there were no worms in it. ²⁵ Moses said, "Eat it today, for today is a Sabbath to the LORD; today you will not find it in the field. ²⁶ Six days you shall gather it, but on the seventh day, which is a Sabbath, there will be none."

So, you see, the people of Israel could rest because of the Lord's provision. In fact, they were commanded to rest precisely because the Lord had promised to provide. Therefore, a failure to rest would be a failure to trust; a failure to rest would be an act of unbelief—a refusal to embrace what God has already promised to provide.

Now, just as the Lord provided in abundance for Israel in the wilderness so that they might rest, so too the Lord provides in abundance for us that we too might find rest. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). This is our double portion in the wilderness: Jesus Christ, God's one and only Son, given for us and for our sins. And just as God called Israel to receive his provision and thus find rest, so too God calls us to receive his *Son* as our Savior and thus find eternal rest.

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:28-30).

Or, as the Lord Jesus said to the crowds who were gathered around him after he miraculously fed the five thousand: "Do not labor 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).

This is what we need: not the food that perishes, but the food that abides forever, not the manna the Israelites ate in the wilderness, but the manna that comes down from heaven—the bread of God. "For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world" (John 6:33).