

God's Glory in the Tough Places

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is an unhappy fact that we human beings can be wildly inconsistent in our emotions and actions. Very often we let our circumstances determine how we behave. We are happy when times are good, but in an instant, can become profoundly unhappy the moment something goes wrong. Sometimes it is even the case that our unhappiness prevents us from seeing the many blessings we actually have received. Well, as we continue in the book of Exodus, we come to the first of what will be many times in the history of Israel when the people of God turn against God to grumble and complain; but as we will see today on *Groundwork*, God's initial reactions to these early times of complaining are quite surprising. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and Dave, we are up to the fifth of eight programs in the series we are doing on the book of Exodus.

DAVE BAST

We have reached the halfway point. I mean, we could probably do 15 programs or 30 programs on Exodus, but we have chosen eight, so we are halfway through.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And by the way, as you are listening to this program, if you have missed any of the previous programs in this series, you can always go to our website: groundworkonline.com, go to the archives and catch up or listen again to one of our previous episodes, if you want; but when we started this series, we started, obviously, in Exodus 1. We noted there that God initially seemed to be absent. God was hardly even mentioned in Chapter 1. He did not seem to be doing anything. Now, eventually we saw that, of course, He was very busy. He was working through those midwives, Shiprah and Puah, and building the Israelites into a mighty nation so strong that the Egyptians actually came to fear them; but, initially at least, God was fairly quiet in the first chapter or two of Exodus. He was not doing anything terribly dramatic.

DAVE BAST

Right, but that changes in Exodus 3, when Moses, whose story we also followed; how he was taken up out of the Nile River as a little baby. His life was saved. He was raised in Pharaoh's palace by Pharaoh's daughter and then he kills an Egyptian in a fit of anger, which the Bible interprets as actually him choosing to side with God's people in their suffering.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, be a champion.

DAVE BAST

Right; so, he runs away. He has now been a shepherd for half of his life; he is an old man, and God appears to him at the burning bush; a very dramatic scene; and God suddenly now goes very active and comes back

with a series of plagues and Israel is delivered.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So now we are, as of this program, up to Exodus 16 – so, 15 chapters in – and indeed, as you just said, Dave, God has been dramatically active; and even though Pharaoh remains stubbornly unimpressed with all the plagues, and even after the tenth plague, actually came after the people. God led the people to the Red Sea and used that same Red Sea to defeat the Egyptian army; and when last we saw the Israelites at the end of Exodus 15, they were whooping it up and celebrating with timbrel and lyre and singing by the Red Sea over the great, great things that God had done for them.

DAVE BAST

Right; and as Christians, we cannot help but read this story and place over it the grid of our spiritual experience in the Gospel. Christians have done that from the very beginning, literally from the New Testament; so, our Exodus event – our Red Sea experience – is being delivered by Christ's death and resurrection; passing through the waters of baptism; now we are launched into the wilderness, where we will experience the realities of pilgrimage. So, Christians again have seen these wilderness years and the events that happen and the tests that Israel undergoes as a metaphor for our whole Christian life; for the walk of faith. We are on our way to Canaan; we are on our way to the Promised Land, but we have to pass through the wilderness.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And unfortunately for Israel initially, that journey of discipleship does not begin well; so let's listen to the first ten verses of Exodus Chapter 16, where we see that the people's attitude from the end of 15 into Chapter 16 has turned on a dime.

¹The whole Israelite community set out from Elim and came to the Desert of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had come out of Egypt. ²And in the desert, the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. ³The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt. There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into the desert to starve this entire assembly to death." ⁴Then the Lord said to Moses, "I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day, and this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions. ⁵On the sixth day, they are to prepare what they bring in, and this is to be twice as much as they gather on the other days."

DAVE BAST

⁶So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, "In the evening, you will know that it was the Lord who brought you out of Egypt. ⁷And in the morning you will see the glory of the Lord. He has heard your grumbling against him. Who are we that you should grumble against us?" ⁸Moses also said, "You will know that it was the Lord when he gives you meat to eat in the evening and all the bread you want in the morning because he has heard your grumbling against him. Who are we? You are not grumbling against us, but against the Lord." ⁹Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the entire Israelite community, 'Come before the Lord, for he has heard your grumbling.'" ¹⁰While Aaron was speaking to the whole Israelite community, they looked toward the desert and there was the glory of the Lord appearing in the cloud.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, right away here, Dave, in this 16th chapter, two really quite dreadful, although maybe somewhat predictable, things are going on. The first is fairly obvious. They are voting with their stomachs. They are hungry, and in their hunger they seem to forget all about the great things God had recently done for them. They forget about the Red Sea; they forget about all of that; they are hungry, so they say: Clearly, God only brought us out here to kill us. We are going to starve to death.

DAVE BAST

Yes, well, they are in a pretty barren place. As I read this story I cannot help but think about television. In the United States, at least, right now there is a tremendous spurt of reality programs that are hugely popular,

apparently; and they are set in wilderness places with people trying to live off the land; and the chief thing that comes out is: there is nothing to eat! So, they are eating grubs and worms and stuff like that. This is exactly the position Israel finds themselves in. They are now in a barren wilderness and there is nothing to eat; so they begin to say: Oh man, why did you bring us out? Egypt was so great!

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is the other thing that is going on, right? Yes, they are hungry, sure; but then it is as though their rumbling stomachs have messed with their memories because Egypt all of sudden goes from the house of bondage to Club Med.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right. It is this wonderful resort. And did you notice the repetition of the word *grumbling* in this story: Grumbling, grumbling, grumbling. Moses says to the people: God has heard your grumbling. Look, you were complaining about Aaron and me for leading you here, but you are really complaining about God. Your grumbling has been heard by him. So, what is that going to lead to?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Unfortunately – I wish I could say that I just cannot see myself in this story at all – but unfortunately, I think I can, and I think many of us can. I think we all know that in our prayer life even we are better at complaining and making requests than we are following up on the things God already gave us. We have more: O, Lord, I need; O, Lord, I want, in our prayers than: thank you, thank you, thank you; and that is what is going on for the Israelites here, too. Terrible things, right? They are accusing God of wanting to kill them.

DAVE BAST

Of trying to kill them, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And they are lying about – Egypt was terrible. That is where their babies were thrown into the Nile. They made bricks without straw; they had cruel taskmasters, and now they act like it was just a gourmet restaurant seven days a week. So, terrible things are going on here.

DAVE BAST

They are really deceiving themselves. Again, this is something we can identify with. How skewed and distorted our perceptions become, and even our memories of the past: Boy, I really had it good then. Before I became a believer, life was great. All I did was have fun, and now I have become a Christian and it has become hard. It is not what I expected. They expected: Wow, we have been delivered. We are just going to fly to the skies on flowery beds of ease, as the hymn writer says; and instead, they are walking through the wilderness, and they are experiencing suffering. So, the question is: What about us? When we experience setbacks; when it is not what we expected, the life of faith, how do we respond?

SCOTT HOEZEE

And, in this story, how is God going to respond to these people? They are grumbling; they are complaining. So, we will look at what God does here, and what he does is surprisingly gracious; and therefore, in its own way, powerfully moving. We will look at that next.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

Hi; you are listening to *Groundwork*. I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and today we are digging into Exodus 16 and 17; really, the story of Israel in the wilderness, and they are just getting started on what is going to end up, as we will discover, becoming a 40-year journey; but they start out on a sour note when they are complaining to God, ultimately, about taking them out here where there is nothing to eat, there is nothing to drink; they had it so good in Egypt; they look back through rose-colored spectacles. So, they are really lashing out against God, who has just delivered them and saved them, and I guess we should expect lightning

bolts next, right? Boom! I am done with you! Forget it!

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is what you would think; and there will be times in the future when things get bad enough that God will come down hard on the people, but not this time. Interestingly, as we saw in the first segment, we read the first ten verses of Exodus 16. What is interesting is that God, even though the people are disrespecting him; they are basically saying, “Thanks for nothing, O, God, for your deliverance from Egypt. Thanks for saving us.” What a terrible thing. But God does not.

Moses at least... In verse 8 Moses knows that the people are not complaining to Moses. Moses says, “You will know it was the Lord when he gives you meat to eat in the evening and all the bread you want in the morning, because he has heard your grumbling against him. Who are we? You are not grumbling against us, but against the Lord.” And Moses is right. So, you think the Lord is going to be at least as ticked off as Moses clearly is, but he is not, not this time.

DAVE BAST

It is a wonderful story as it comes to God’s response because it shows us something that occurs again and again throughout the Bible. God has big shoulders. He can take it. He can even take abuse; and he does not get angry with us when we vent our feelings. As we follow the story through, we will see that judgment will break out against Israel when they turn to other gods; when they turn away from God; but as long as they are speaking to him; as long as they are sharing their need, and even their inappropriate at times reactions, God can take it. He accepts it.

You just think of the psalms; how often there are these complaints that are issued against God, and the psalms of lament, and “God, where are you? God, what are you doing?” There is nothing wrong with that, really. That is not so much – it is maybe a little bit ungrateful – a little bit shortsighted, as we have seen. Their memory was playing tricks on them.

SCOTT HOEZEE

This is not laudable behavior, by any means.

DAVE BAST

Right; but, it is not going to trigger God’s anger; it is going to trigger his action.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And his grace. A lot of people think – in fact, one of the oldest heresies in the Church is called marcionism – is the belief that the God of the Old Testament is so angry and thin-skinned all the time that it has to be a different God than the one Jesus talks about in the New Testament; but that is absolutely not true. This story is one of many where – again, you mentioned the Psalms – there are lots of psalms of lament, but in psalms of praise and thanksgiving, again and again and again the people give thanks to God for his lovingkindness, which is his grace – in the New Testament we call it grace; and this story is an early instance of that. That God just feeds them. Yes, they are right; they are hungry. So, God says: Okay. I am going to give you meat to eat and bread to eat. So here we see an amazing instance of God’s grace.

DAVE BAST

It is a wonderful story of providence, from which we get our word *provision*, and even provisions, as in food. So, God will give provisions to them in the form of the famous story of manna, as it comes later in this chapter. We did not read that, but the word *manna* is a very interesting word in Hebrew. It actually means *what is it?*

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, what is it?

DAVE BAST

So, they come out in the morning and they see this stuff lying on the grass that has come out in the night somehow, and they say, “What is it – *manna*? It is manna. It is bread from heaven, as Moses describes it here early in Chapter 16.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it is indeed God’s provision; and where it happens is so key. So, let’s listen to the 10th verse. This is Exodus 16:10:

While Aaron was speaking to the whole Israelite community, they looked toward the desert and there was the glory of the Lord appearing in a cloud.

Now why is that important? Well, the people had turned back west. They were looking back toward Egypt. “Let’s go back there. We had barbecued dinners and chicken dinners and potpie and onions and meat and leeks,” but God takes them by the shoulders, swivels them to the east, to the place of death, out toward the wilderness, and what do they see in the place of death? The glory of the Lord; which if you think about it, that is a very powerful message.

DAVE BAST

Yes; to the east of them there is nothing; it is just barren waste; because they have not actually gotten very far into the Sinai Peninsula. If you can picture the map in your head, they have only journeyed for a few weeks; so they are barely edging out into the really hostile country; and as they look longingly back toward the Nile and its greenery and its food, God says: No, turn around. You will find me out there where it gets even harder and harsher and more empty and more desolate. God, in his grace, meets us in the empty places; in the desolate scenes of our lives.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And you mentioned, Dave, in the first segment, that we Christians have an overlay for this story of our experience of Exodus from sin through Christ; and indeed, that verse in particular, verse 10, where the people look to the death place and that is where they see God and his glory; that is a preview of the cross, really; and for all of us who know wilderness periods of life when the loved one dies, when the child breaks your heart, when the job is eliminated and you are in dire straits, what a comfort this is that when we look into those desert and wilderness stretches of our lives – and we all have them – God is not absent. That is where you are more likely to see the glory of the Lord. It does not always come easily and it does not come right away sometimes, but this passage assures us that when we go into those dry, deathly seasons of our lives, even looking that way, we still have a chance to see the glory of the Lord. It is very, very moving.

DAVE BAST

And it will come to us in Jesus. Not to put too fine a point on it, but we have Jesus’ own authority for reading this story in Exodus 16 and pointing to him, because he will say in John Chapter 6: I am the bread of life. I am the bread of heaven. I am the bread who came down from heaven, and I will feed you, I will nourish you, I will sustain you. I will deliver you through my death – in the place of my death – this is not fanciful for us to read this story in these terms. Christians have testified to this through the ages. Maybe you yourself have a story like this that when you were in the hardest place in your life, that is where you met him, and experienced him as more precious in that time and place than anywhere else. He saved your life; he sustained you; he was the one.

SCOTT HOEZEE

In just a moment, we are going to move to the next chapter, and we will see yet another wonderful instance of love and grace from God. We will look at that in just a moment.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and Dave, as we wrap this program, let's jump right to the next chapter in Exodus. We have been in the 16th chapter; now let's listen to these verses from Exodus 17:

¹The whole Israelite community set out from the Desert of Sin traveling from place to place as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ²So they quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink." And Moses replied, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the Lord to the test?" ³But the people were thirsty for water there and they grumbled against Moses. They said, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and our livestock die of thirst?" ⁴Moses cried to the Lord, "What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me." ⁵The Lord answered Moses, "Go out in front of the people, take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile and go. ⁶I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock and water will come out of it for the people to drink." So Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel, ⁷and he called the place Massa and Meribah because the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

DAVE BAST

Sounds like a rerun of the previous chapter, doesn't it? They have had not only manna to eat, but quail have been provided in a miraculous way. That story is told also in the book of Exodus, because they got sick of just eating bread; they wanted some meat to go with it, and God had said: I will give you meat; I will give you bread; I will do all that for you. Now, "Hey, we are thirsty. How about a chaser?" There is no water here. Admittedly, they had a point; you cannot live without water.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Not for long, no.

DAVE BAST

It is bad news for them.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is pillar to post for Moses; so he got them the one thing and now he has to get them the other. Again, though, as we saw in Chapter 16, Moses seems to be more exasperated here than God. Moses is ready to throttle the people. "Lord, what am I supposed to do with these people?" But God comes back quite calmly and says: Here is what you do; I will take you to a rock and you are going to hit it and water will come out. I will take care of this. But there is something interesting in this chapter that scholars have noticed in recent years, and maybe they have noticed it all along, but I know I know I have heard it from some recent commentators; something interesting happens here where – so, Moses has to strike a rock – we all know that – so water from the rock; but just before that God said: I am going to stand in front of the rock; which a lot of scholars have noted now means when Moses hit the rock he was hitting God. God let himself get struck and the life-giving water proceeded out from him, which is a very, very interesting way to see this story.

DAVE BAST

Well, and once again, the New Testament writers interpret this story in terms of Christ; and so, Paul will say writing to the Corinthians: The children of Israel drank from the spiritual rock and that was Christ. The rock was Christ. In fact, there was even a tradition among the rabbis that the rock followed the children of Israel, which would be a little bit magical, but it is called Horeb, and Horeb is in some sense another name for Sinai, but they are not quite at Mount Sinai yet; so, it is a mysterious story, and to the Apostle Paul, it is clearly again a picture of what Christ does for us. God allows himself to be struck on our behalf.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is an early instance in scripture – and a very, very early instance in the history of Israel as a nation as they now are, of God not being the thundering, Zeus-like, Greek god of anger figure that some people think the God of the Old Testament consistently is, but of being gracious, and indeed, in this story, being gracious to

the point of letting himself be struck in order that the people might receive the water that they need. As you just said, Dave, that is clearly a prefiguring of Christ, as Paul picked up in that passage you mentioned, 1 Corinthians 10:4, that the rock was Christ. That is a fascinating connection that Paul made.

DAVE BAST

I want to bring us down to a landing here by talking about one other element in this story. The concept comes up, Moses says, “Do not test God;” do not put him to the test; which reminds us of Jesus. He actually quotes that when he is tempted by Satan, “Do not put God to the test.” What they are really saying is do not doubt God’s goodness. Do not accuse God. Do not malign his character. Later, in the book of Psalms, we come to a reference to this incident of Meribah and Massa, which means grumbling and complaining.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And quarrelling.

DAVE BAST

Right; and so, the Psalmist says in Psalm 95, a great psalm, which includes: Come, let us bow down and worship. Let us kneel before the Lord our Maker. He is our God; we are his people. And then he goes on: Today if only you would hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah, as you did that day at Massa in the wilderness when your ancestors tested me.

So, the lesson that the Bible itself wants to draw from this is, do not doubt God; do not question God; do not say, “God, are you for me or are you against me? Why am I going through this?” Do not harden your hearts, but respond in faith.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And indeed, we are very thankful and grateful for the fact that we serve a God of grace, a God of longsuffering patience, a God of forgiveness; those are the good things. In so many ways, Exodus 16 and 17 look like bad news chapters based on the behavior of the people; but they are actually good news chapters because of how gracious God is; but nevertheless, as the psalm that you just read, Dave, Psalm 95 puts it: That is no excuse for putting the Lord to the test. That is no excuse for doubting the goodness of God because, indeed, even as these stories show, and as we will see supremely in the ultimate revelation of God, which is Jesus – the express image of God par excellence – he is gracious. We never want to forget how good and powerful and gracious is our God.

DAVE BAST

Well, thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. We are your hosts, Dave Bast, with Scott Hoezee, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. Visit groundworkonline.com to tell us what topics or passages you would like to dig into next on *Groundwork*.

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