

Frustrating Grace, How Sore the Sound

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Preacher: Joe Hall

[0 : 00] We love singing the old classics, don't we?

Of course, that isn't the words that we sing! And yet, if you want to talk about ancient songs of God's people, that one actually goes back quite a way.

Only back over the page in Exodus, perhaps six weeks ago or so, God's people stood by the seashore and sang God's praise.

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that saved a slave like me! I once was lost, but now I'm found, was bound, but now I'm free!

I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously. Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?

[1 : 05] Six weeks or a month later, how the soundtrack has changed. Last time, Simon showed us how only three days into their journey and God's people began to grumble, What shall we drink?

The Lord didn't tell them off. He simply gave them fresh water to drink. And he told them, This is a test. If you walk with me and trust me, if you listen and follow me, well, look what I will do for you. If I, the Lord, am your shepherd, you shall not want. Now, if you know you're being tested, you tend to want to show your best, don't you?

You want to kind of live up to the standard that's been set. Some of you, I know, are studying for tests and exams. On exam day, you want to show what you know, right?

Well, the people of God know the Lord is testing them. Will they show him that they know him?

Well, I guess today we see their best.

[2 : 17] And it's pretty dreadful. The Lord said just before our reading, I am the Lord your healer. Today we see very clearly that his people need his healing.

Not so much of their bodies, though he does meet their bodily needs, but of their hard hearts and closed ears. Because they cannot pass the test of truly knowing the Lord and walking with him by faith on their own, as they are.

So this morning, we're just going to listen in to their heartbeat in this passage. And on the way through, we'll think about whether we need that same healing today, how we know if we do, and where it comes from.

Where to be healed. Three points for us this morning, then. Firstly, your grumbling is against the Lord. Follow along, if you can, in your Bibles with me from verse 1.

They set out from Elam, all the congregation of the people of Israel, and came to the wilderness of Sin, the 15th day of the second month, after they departed from the land of Egypt.

[3 : 30] And the whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. 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?

You've brought us here to kill us with hunger. Appropriately, this happens in the wilderness of Sin. The wordplay works in English, but not in Hebrew. And yet they do sin there.

We heard them grumble last time, what shall we drink? This time they go a lot further. Think about what they're saying.

It would be bad enough if they were saying, we'd rather be dead than be here. I mean, that would be quite a way to throw God's amazing grace back in his face. But that actually isn't strong enough for them to say.

Notice they don't just say, if only we'd died in Egypt, but if only we'd died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt. We'd happily have died like God's enemies, Moses.

[4 : 36] If only you'd let us live like God's enemies. If only we could have come under God's judgment, we wouldn't have had to suffer his salvation.

An image we've thought about often in our series, your son's been kidnapped, trafficked across the world. You go on an adventure to rescue him from his captives. You're on the plane home together. He turns to you and says, Dad, I wish you'd left me in slavery. At least they fed me there. In fact, I kind of wish that you just ended it all there instead of bringing me here.

Let's be clear, brothers and sisters, that that is not something that Christians complain about. The classic thing to say about this passage is, we all love a moan in church, don't we?

Christians, we just love a grumble. If someone calls himself a Christian and says in their hearts, I wish God had never come into my life.

[5 : 39] I wish he'd left me alone to live and die in my sin. Think of all the time I've wasted not living for this world, not satisfying the desires of my flesh.

If this is what getting to the promised land involves, send me back to slavery. If a Christian is saying that, at best that person is hanging on to the Lord by a thread.

It suggests that like the Israelites, their separation from spiritual darkness is only superficial in their circumstances, but not in their heart.

Put it like this, you can be physically in a church, in a Christian relationship, in a Christian family, outwardly be separated from all that.

But in here, still very much cuddle up to the things of this world. Worship the gods of this world.

[6 : 45] We dream about putting the chains back on and being a slave to our old idols. Now experience has taught me that more of us in this room are probably closer to that than we would like to admit.

Friends, if that's you today, you're saying in your heart, I don't think this is worth it. Just see how God replies to that grumble in verse 4.

Then the Lord said to Moses, Behold, I am about to rain bread from heaven for you. And the people will go out and gather a day's portion every day that I may test them whether they'll walk in my law or not.

They're hungry, they want to chuck the whole thing in, and the Lord says, I hear you. I'll give you bread every day as much as you need.

I mean, if you were that dad listening to your ungrateful son grumble about his rescue, how would you react? The Lord hears his firstborn son's ungrateful grumbling and rains down provision for them, not a few crumbs, but plenty for everyone, not even through created means, but direct from heaven, miracle bread.

[8 : 12] God says of himself later in Exodus that he is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

And we see it's true. He proves it here and time and time and time again where our faith fails, he remains faithful. Friends, this morning, however you've come to church and from whatever kind of week that you've come and whatever is bubbling away in your heart as you listen, take and eat of his grace and mercy and patience and loving kindness.

take his free gift and be satisfied. Some of you are coming to the end of school and looking forward to what's next, maybe moving away to uni.

Some of you may have moved away to uni here and you're here today and you have thought in your heart, I can't wait to be free. Give me those meat pots. But it wasn't like that, was it?

Some of you are revising for exams as you come to the end of school, get ready to leave home. Have the people of God here done their revision? What was it like in Egypt?

[9 : 37] Well, this is what they said at the time. This is in chapter 5. They cry to Pharaoh, why do you treat your servants like this? No straw is given to your servants and yet you tell us to make many bricks.

And behold, your servants are beaten. Rewind, not a single meat pot in sight. Hardly, we ate bread every day to the full.

I don't think so. Their hearts are deceiving them. Things are not what they seem. Friends, that life, partying, drinking, casual sex, all the recreation, holidays, work, money, study, achievements, as much as you can get looks amazing from the outside, but it will trap you and will not fill you.

It will take everything in you and give you back scraps. Jesus said to people who were looking for that life, do not work for the food that perishes but for the food that endures to eternal life.

I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me shall not hunger. Whoever believes in me shall never thirst. He came down from heaven, loved us, gave himself for us, take, eat, feed on him, have full

and eternal life in him.

[11:09] Maybe you know somebody in that position. You're praying for somebody right now. A child or a friend or somebody that you've spent time with in church.

Don't lose heart. Keep praying. Keep pointing them to Jesus. God rained down bread. He is the bread that came from heaven. He says, this is the will of him who sent me that I should lose nothing of all he's given me but raise it up on the last day.

Those whoever's are precious, aren't they? Whoever comes to me, whoever believes in me, don't lose hope. And what about those of us who do thank God every day for our rescue?

Those of us who wouldn't say we grumble about the fact that he saved us. Well, brothers and sisters, we still do have those seeds of grumbling in our hearts, don't we?

Even if we are quick to stamp out the root of bitterness as it grows, we will still be tempted as we are, aren't we, to glance back.

[12:20] Perhaps especially in times of suffering, spiritual disappointment, struggle, frustration, we all have it in us to complain sinfully.

Often, I think, that comes out in the direction of Israel's grumbling. Notice that they don't accuse God of bringing them to the wilderness to die, but Moses. And yet, as Moses rightly points out, what are we?

Your grumbling is not against us but against the Lord. It's much more comfortable, I think, easier for Christians to say that no one at church really cares about me or spends time with me than it is to go to God and say, I don't feel like you care for me.

Where are you in my life right now? How many Christians have left churches because they told themselves that those people were to blame for their suffering instead of seeing their suffering in the light of God's saving grace and his overruling providence and turning to him to bring their complaint and find mercy and help in their time of need?

Yes, friends, complain to God, to your ministers and elders about your suffering and struggles. We can do that. But it is wrong in our suffering to complain about God who orders our lives in his perfect wisdom and love even if we do it by projecting our issues onto church leaders who often don't have any control over what's happening.

[14:04] In the words of Moses, what are we? Given the right soil conditions, the right temperature, those seeds will grow in us as soon as we see them sprouting.

We must root them out. Leave them long enough, they will grow up and this is the fruit that they will bear in time. If only Christians, the church, God, had left me alone, life would be so much better. No one thinks those words are going to cross their lips until they do. Brothers and sisters, let no root of bitterness spring up among us. Our grumbling is against the Lord.

Secondly, though, we see in his gracious response to our grumbling, he tests our faith in his word. He says that at the end of verse 4, he'll send the bread from heaven that I may test them whether they'll walk in my law or not.

Imagine a package comes through the door and on it is a label and it says, do you not open until your birthday? Clearly somebody has been prepared, they've thought about you, they've chosen something that they think that you'll like for your birthday and they want you to open it on your birthday.

[15:20] Now you could think, well, whatever's in here, I'm going to have it anyway. It doesn't really matter when I open it, does it, and tear it open like an animal and find out what's inside.

But then you might stop and think, no, this person cares for me enough to send me something. I guess I care about them enough to honor their instruction.

After all, I only have the gift because of the giver. That kind of gets to the heart, I think, of what the Lord is doing here.

Do his people only want his gifts or can they look beyond the gifts to truly know the giver? Now that kind person on your birthday probably wasn't deliberately setting you a test.

Maybe they wouldn't have minded if you'd opened it early. But the Lord is deliberately testing his people because it's their hearts that he's after. He wants them to know him.

[16:23] Of course, he knows that they won't listen to him. It's not a test in that sense. He knows the outcome. But he wants to work with them on their trust in him.

So he gives them this gift and he sets them two tests. And they shouldn't be hard tests because just look how good the gift is in verse 13.

In the evening, quail came up and covered the camp and in the morning, dew lay around the camp. When the dew had gone up, there was on the face of the wilderness a fine flake-like thing as fine as frost on the ground.

What is it? Moses said, it's the bread that the Lord has given you to eat. Imagine, your tummy is rumbling, the people are grumbling, and out of the sky comes tumbling, meat to eat.

First, the sound of a million flapping wings like thunder across the sky. The sky goes dark and then comes raining down quails.

[17 : 29] A quail is like a small chicken. So this has just become the biggest rotisserie restaurant in the world, feeding all of Israel. Dinner is served.

I won't be able to eat for a week, they say as they go to bed, only to wake up in the morning, step out of the tent into the sunshine and find that the ground is coated now not with quails, but with a glistening crust like frost.

And the rotisserie has turned into a patisserie. It's bread for breakfast and lunch. I guess it maybe had a kind of crumbly texture like coriander seeds it said, but it was sweet to taste, like wafers with honey.

Not so bad. Wow. Should we ration it? I mean, you know what it's like on a long hike, you don't want to eat all the snacks at once. No, says the Lord. Verse 16, gather each one of you as much as he can eat.

So they gathered and as they measured it, no one had too much and no one had too little.

Everyone had as much as they could eat. They ate until they were hungry no more.

[18 : 41] They took and took and it never seemed to run out. No rationing here, just full tummies. No more rumbling, no more grumbling.

What a gift. But do they love only the gift or the giver too? The tests will tell us. The first test God sets them is there in verse 19.

Moses said, let no one leave any of it over till the morning. It's a dead simple instruction. Don't try and keep it for tomorrow. You won't need to. The Lord will give you enough for every day.

Do they pass? Check their answer in verse 20. They did not listen to Moses. Some left part of it till the morning and it bread worms and stank and Moses was angry with them.

Big fat fail. So he gives them another test. What if God tells them this time to keep it for tomorrow?

Right? They're good at that. The only condition is that they're to keep it on the day he tells them, the sixth day, and not gather it on the seventh day.

[19 : 50] There'll be twice as much for them on day six, so they don't need to go out and get it on the Sabbath. Surely they'll love that. Check their answer, verse 27.

On the seventh day, some of the people went out to gather and found none. The Lord said to Moses, How long will you refuse to keep my commandments and laws?

He tells them not to keep it and they keep it. He tells them to keep it and they don't keep it. He can't win with these people. And they could hardly complain that the rules weren't fair, they weren't hungry anymore, there was plenty.

They could have listened to the Lord and lived. But they chose not to listen, not only in one way, but in two opposite ways. And the Lord stresses how serious that is when he says that they refuse to keep his commands.

That's a word that we've heard before in Exodus used of Pharaoh when he refused to what? Listen to God, do what he said, let my people go.

[20 : 56] Moses, we've got the people's test results back. Yes, they show that their hearts are infected with Egyptitis. Hearts as hard as stone.

In fact, it is a powerful strain of Adamitis. There's no known cure. I wonder if you noticed that echo.

When has the Lord said previously, eat your fill? Adam, you may eat of every tree of the garden.

God's garden temple is your fridge, your pantry.

Take and eat. Enjoy the feast laid on for you by the Lord, but testing of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat. It should have been so easy. No such thing as hunger.

Every tree but one. And that is the tree they ate from. The exam is finished. Test failed. What was wrong with the tree, we wonder?

[21 : 59] What was wrong with the manna? Nothing. They're wonderful gifts, but God has spoken. Do not open until I say. But they did anyway.

And friends, we do carry that heart disease from the garden. God has given us so many wonderful gifts. everything that we have and enjoy in life.

Best of all, his son to save us from our sins. But do we love the giver behind the gifts? How do we know? Well, here's the test.

How carefully do you listen to the way he says to receive his gifts? Do we honor him by obeying his instructions on the packaging as it were?

We could talk about our daily needs. Jesus says, do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth. Do we?

[22 : 59] Do we pray, give us today our daily bread, only to then go out and build ourselves bigger barns? Do we eat and drink to his glory, not indulging too much or getting drunk, showing hospitality, sharing what we have?

But since Jesus says he is the bread that came down from heaven, we could ask too, do we receive him in the way God has told us to? Come to me, believe in me, says Jesus.

Rest the whole weight of your life upon me. You'll never be hungry and thirsty again. Which begs the question, does it not? If we are hungry and thirsty, what have we been feeding on that isn't him? Do we set aside the Lord's day to come and rest in him in a special way? Sunday is a kind of litmus test, isn't it, as it was in the wilderness? Does it make us nervous not doing our normal work, our jobs, our study on a Sunday?

How confident are we that when the Lord tells us this is a day of rest, that he's taking care of the rest? That's not to say we're irresponsible, right?

[24 : 17] The people still gathered twice as much the previous day. They prepared for the Sabbath, but then they took it and rested in the Lord's promise and knew his faithful care and provision for them.

Think what blessing we forfeit when we do our normal thing on a Sunday and forgo the freedom he gives us from slaving away over the things of this world.

Friends, do we love not only the gift but the giver also? Do we receive God's good gifts in the way that he tells us to or like the Israelites? Do we not unwrap them greedily and throw the card with his words, his message, of his love and welcome, his instructions in the bin.

As he provides for all our needs out of the riches of his glory, the Lord tests our faith in his word.

And finally, he keeps a testimony of his love.

The final five verses record the way the Lord wanted his love and faithfulness to be remembered by having a jar of manna kept before him, eventually to be put in the ark of the covenant.

[25 : 34] And importantly, that's for future generations. Verse 32, so that they may see the bread with which I fed you. Right, obviously the people who were there at the time didn't need to see the bread, they ate it every day for 40 years.

So it's their children and their children's children and children's children's children who go into the promised land who the Lord has in mind here, who have stopped eating the manna and in time wouldn't have seen it for themselves.

He wants that testimony of his love to be kept for the future so that his people won't forget quite so easily that he is the Lord their healer, the God of their salvation who gives them life to the full, that they would remember the lesson in their unfaithfulness he is faithful.

When they don't love the giver of the good gifts, he will keep giving to them anyway. That's what he wants preserved in this jar.

But ultimately, he was looking even further down the generations than that because the manna in the wilderness, the manna in the jar was itself only a taste of the true bread of life that came down from heaven into a mother's womb, into a manger, into the world, onto the cross.

[27 : 00] And out of the tomb. As Jesus spoke with the very distant descendants of these people in his day about the manna in the wilderness, he said to their amazement, I am the bread of life.

Whoever comes to me shall not hunger. Whoever believes in me shall never thirst. Where Adam failed the test, Jesus obeyed.

Where Israel failed the test, Jesus succeeded as he starved in the wilderness and was tempted to feed himself with bread. He said, man shall not live by bread alone, but what?

By every word that comes from the mouth of God. The very lesson that the people were to learn in the wilderness, he has kept. He was tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin.

And so, he says, if we come to him and believe in him, our own hearts will be healed of their hardness, our emptiness will be filled, and we will learn from him how to love the Lord our God.
[28 : 08] We think, don't we, we live so long after the Exodus, so long after the Gospels, we don't have a jar of manna to look at and remember that lesson. But brothers and sisters, we have something so much better.

we have the testimony of his supper, the bread of communion as a token of his love and faithfulness to sustain us in Christ on our journey from the Egypt of this world to the promised land of the new creation.

And we have the testimony of his word and the record that it preserves of Christ having come down from heaven to obey where we haven't, die where we should have, and rise again for our eternal life.

And the wonderful news is that we, like the people in the desert, need only take and eat of him by faith, receive him plenty, be filled with him, satisfied in him, and have eternal life, beginning now and lasting forever.

Friends, look to Christ and know that just as his grace has led us safe thus far, his grace will lead us safely home, for he is the Lord our God who saved us out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

[29 : 43] let's pray and thank him. Loving Lord, you are faithful where we fail.

You love us though so often, Lord, we love you little. You provide for our every need, and yet, Lord, we work for food that perishes.

have mercy on us, we pray, soften our hearts, grant us faith in your promises, help us to rest truly upon you. Help us, we pray, when we are weary to feed on you, find fullness in you.

Help us, when we are wondering, to be warned, Lord, and turn back from that which cannot satisfy.

We pray, do you lead us all home to the promised land of the new creation.

Feed us, we pray, on our way. In Jesus' name, Amen.