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Exodus 16:1-15

Twenty-second Message

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GIVE US EACH DAY OUR DAILY BREAD

SERIES: BASIC TRAINING – SPIRITUAL SURVIVAL CAMP

We are continuing our series from the book of Exodus, tracing Israel's journeys from the Red Sea to Mount Sinai through a vast, untamed wilderness. On the way, God will equip this adolescent nation with five spiritual disciplines specifically designed to allow her to not just survive the wilderness, but thrive in it. To capture the supreme importance of these disciplines I have entitled this series *Basic Training: Spiritual Survival Camp*. The first three lessons have to do with Israel's basic appetites of thirst and hunger. God uses our most essential and strongest physical appetites to shape our spiritual appetites. This demonstrates how integrated we are, and how physical disciplines are a vital training ground for cultivating spiritual habits. The fourth lesson will teach Israel how to be victorious in the face of vicious external attacks, while the fifth will teach her the importance of maintaining healthy relationships. Forming strong and intimate bonds within the community is one of the keys to surviving in the wilderness. These five disciplines will prepare Israel to hear God's voice on the mountain.

In Exodus 15:22-29 we looked at the first discipline, as God taught Israel how to quench her thirst in a land with no water. She learned that through prayer and carefully listening to his instruction she could transform bitter wells into springs of living water. Today the topic shifts from thirst to hunger. God will teach Israel how to survive hunger in a wilderness where nothing grows, by trusting in a Creator who rains bread from heaven.

The importance of this chapter for biblical theology and modern day living cannot be overestimated. First, as we survey the entire Biblical canon we discover that there is no authentic spiritual life that has not been shaped by the wilderness. This chapter becomes central for much of the New Testament application surrounding that theme. Jesus, as the new and greater Moses, will repeat the miracle of bread more than once for his disciples, taking it to new levels. Only after they have begun to fully understand the bread miracles are they able to hear God's voice on a mountain (Mark 9:7). Much of the material in this chapter will also find its way into Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, the manual for Christian discipleship.

Secondly, in terms of our modern world no text could be more relevant. The stress of today's world is readily seen in the abuse of our appetites. It seems as if almost every family has been impacted by some kind of eating disorder: anorexia, bulimia, or compulsive overeating. As a college gymnast I was continually reminded by our coach of the danger of being overweight. His motto was, "An ounce of grain is a pound of pain." During my freshman and sophomore years I was always trying new and extreme diets. These would only last so long before I fell victim to binge eating. Then the guilt would hit and I would pledge to reform under some other extreme regimen, but to no avail. I would have become bulimic, but by God's grace, I was unable to force myself to throw up. Though I performed under the lights of a great university, my soul's cravings told me I might as

well have been a slave in Egypt. Years later I would learn that my eating patterns were actually a mirror for my need of approval.

How do we break out of our hunger addictions and master our appetites? That is a long road for many among us. I confess there are many appetites I have yet to control. I pray that this text will give us a lens to understand the first crucial steps to break our addictive hunger pangs, and to see how the wilderness can reshape our appetites so that we are fed with the life of God and are fully satisfied. As we master this spiritual discipline we will then be in a position to train the next generation, as God's parenting skills are well illustrated in this text.

The chapter is divided into four sections:

1. The bread crisis (vv. 1-3)
2. The miracle of bread (vv. 4-15)
3. The distribution of the bread (vv. 16-30)
4. The *remembrance* of the bread (vv. 31-36).

Today we will examine the miracle of the bread, while next week we will examine the spiritual disciplines surrounding its distribution.

I. The Bread Crisis (16:1-3)

Then they set out from Elim, and all the congregation of the sons of Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after their departure from the land of Egypt. (Exod 16:1 NASB)

Elim was an oasis lush with water and abundant in date palms. The temptation to stay in that place was strong, but Israel was not destined to settle down in an oasis in the wilderness. She was a pilgrim people on her way to personally meet with God on a mountain. The spiritual discipline of hunger plays out in the land in between. Israel finds itself in the tension between the oasis (Elim) and the place of revelation (Sinai). Like Israel, we have to leave our temporary oases and press on for, as difficult as it may seem, temporary bliss is not our final destination. God wants us in the tension-taut territory where he can reshape our appetites.

Israel set out on the fifteenth day of the second month, exactly one month to the day since she celebrated the Passover feast. The question our text seeks to answer is, Can the Creator God create a feast in the wilderness where nothing grows?

The whole congregation of the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The sons of Israel said to them, "Would that we had died by the LORD's hand in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat, when we ate bread to the full; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." (16:2-3)

The root “grumble” (Heb. *lun*, “complain,” “express resentment,” “murmur”), found eight times in our text, becomes the predominant theme of the chapter. Reading these verses we are shocked that the Israelites could so quickly forget the transforming miracle of the waters of Marah, and the life giving promise of 15:26, and fall victim to adolescent-like complaining. And yet perhaps, if we are honest, we have to admit we are not shocked, since Israel’s behavior is so much like our own. How often does the memory of some life-changing miracle evaporate like dew under the hot sun the minute we face difficulty?

Israel’s present sufferings have had a profound effect on her perspective. First, persistent hunger pangs obscure her historic objectivity with a very selective memory. She visualizes her past in Egypt as if it was a life of luxury, void of slavery, sorrow and oppression—pots of meat and bread to the full! There is no mention of the broader context of centuries of torturous labor, plagues, or the miraculous sea crossing. Selective memory can be very destructive to faith. Secondly, prolonged hunger has made her feel totally abandoned by God. In despair she says she would have preferred death from slavery in Egypt than to be given over to death from hunger in the wilderness. The third effect of her hunger is misplaced responsibility. With one voice she places 100% of the blame for her distress squarely upon her leaders, Moses and Aaron.

How will the Lord react to this slap in the face after his show of unparalleled power and grace? How should parents deal with such ungrateful complaining from their adolescents? What follows is an incredible surprise to the reader.

II. Wonder Bread (16:4-15)

A. The Announcement of the Miracle (16:4-5)

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a day’s portion every day, that I may test them, whether or not they will walk in My instruction. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather daily.” (16:4-5)

Rather than a harsh rebuke for Israel’s immature faith, God graciously promises that he himself will feed her and supernaturally take care of her needs. And if this announcement of grace is not enough to astound us, his generosity goes even further. It will be a downpour of blessing: “I will *rain* bread from heaven for you.” In Egypt, God “rained” a very heavy and destructive hail over the whole landscape (9:18, 23), but in the wilderness, he will “rain” bread—a symbol of life. In response to her complaint, Israel receives a miraculous wonder that will reshape the barren wilderness into a storehouse of life. Such words are incredible to our ears. Who is this gracious God who turns the other cheek? I’m sure the same sense of amazement followed Jesus’ teaching regarding the father’s display of lavish love on the return of his prodigal son (Luke 15). Yet the love of the Father never changes. Had he treated Israel as she deserved, she would have died in the wilderness.

Instead, by God’s grace, Israel’s perspective will be completely changed. She is instructed to look for bread from an entirely different source than she did in Egypt. Instead of looking to the earth, she is to fix her gaze into the heavens. It is as if in the wilderness our natural bearings are turned 180°. In the original creation, water comes from heaven and bread arises out of the earth. But in the

wilderness, bread rains down out of heaven and water rises up out of the rock (17:6)!¹

With the announcement of bread from heaven, God gives very detailed instructions on how it is to be gathered. Since the Garden of Eden, God has always been pictured as a God of tremendous bounty and generosity, but with his gifts come responsibilities for how they are to be enjoyed. (This will be the topic of our study next week.)

After this announcement, Moses and Aaron prepare the people for a sacred encounter with God.

B. The True Source of Bread (16:6-8)

So Moses and Aaron said to all the sons of Israel, “At evening you will know that the LORD has brought you out of the land of Egypt; and in the morning you will see the glory of the LORD, for He hears your grumbings against the LORD; and what are we, that you grumble against us?” Moses said, “This will happen when the LORD gives you meat to eat in the evening, and bread to the full in the morning; for the LORD hears your grumbings which you grumble against Him. And what are we? Your grumbings are not against us but against the LORD.” (16:6-8)

One the most important tasks of leaders to help people grow in their faith is reshaping their wrong perspectives. Both Moses and Aaron are quick to point out that Israel’s view of things is extremely deficient. They have left out the most important player in the drama, the Lord himself. Forcefully—“And what are we?”²—they disconnect themselves as objects of the attack and redirect Israel’s anger to the proper source, the Lord. This hunger crisis is not about them; it centers on their relationship with the Lord. It is he who has led them into the desert, not their leaders.

This is a vital insight in the process of spiritual growth. We will never make progress in our faith if we refuse to see that our anger is most often directed at the wrong source. If you are looking to people in leadership, a spouse, a boss or even a friend to satisfy your deepest hungers, you will never be satisfied. And your anger towards them for not meeting your expectations will prevent you from connecting with the Lord. One of the great characteristics of Job is that throughout all his intense speeches he directs all of his questions, objections and anger to the Lord. As a result of this tenacious resolve that refuses to settle his pain in any court, he has a privileged encounter with the glory of God.

C. Doing an About-face (16:9-12)

Then Moses said to Aaron, “Say to all the congregation of the sons of Israel, ‘Come near before the LORD, for He has heard your grumbings.’” It came about as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the sons of Israel, that they looked toward the wilderness, and behold, the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud. (16:9-10)

Moses and Aaron affirm four times (vv. 7-9, 12) that God has indeed “heard” their complaint, and in response they will “see” his glory, and then they will “know” (vv. 6, 12) that it is the Lord who rescued them.³ In the language of worship, Moses directs Aaron to invite all of Israel to “draw near” to meet with God.

One of the benefits of the wilderness to Israel was that she was geographically disconnected from all the idolatry of Egypt. With a supernatural barrier between her and Egypt there was no way she could feed her soul from the idolatrous life of Pharaoh’s world, except through memory. So now instead of facing back to Egypt with her distorted memory, Aaron forces Israel to an about-face and

stare right into the heart of the wilderness to see the glory of the Lord fully present in that wasteland. The wilderness forces us to have an encounter with the living God or we will die; there is no third way. This is the only answer to the idols that feed on our appetites. We need to create geographical separation from the world, and then turn our face toward the living God. Worshipping from the depth of our hunger pangs then reshapes our appetites.

If we think that this training is optional for a believer, we must remember that the Son of Man had to endure the same training. Immediately after his baptism the Spirit thrust him into the wilderness. For forty days and nights he was without food, and he became very hungry. The devil tempted him, saying, "If You are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread." But Jesus responded by quoting Deuteronomy 8:3, "It is written, 'Man shall not live on bread alone'" (Luke 4:3-4). Because bread by itself cannot impart life to the soul, Jesus refused to feed himself. Like Israel, he must wait for God to feed him. In the end, Mark writes, "angels were ministering to Him" (Mark 1:13). The term "ministering" (Gk. *diakoneo*) is the same term used for waiting on tables in the books of Acts (6:2), which may suggest that the angels served Christ with heavenly food. Jesus trained his disciples in the same discipline. After he fed the five thousand there were twelve baskets of bread left over. He was teaching the apostles not to feed their own appetites but to feed others first, and then God would feed them. Such bread is more than satisfying.

To their amazement, the Israelites see something they never expected in the wilderness: a massive display of God's glory. They are just as surprised by the encounter as Moses was to see the burning glory of God in an ordinary bush. This encounter redefines the wilderness as the place of God's revelation and glory. Rather than being a God-forsaken desert void of life, the wilderness is a sacred sanctuary of his holy presence, which allows God's people large doses of eternal life that are a foretaste of the age to come, when all space and all time will be holy. As Edmund Leach comments:

The Wilderness is the Other World. Entering or leaving the Wilderness symbolizes a metaphysical movement from the here and now to the timelessness of the Other or vice versa... The Wilderness is marked off as altogether Other. It is a world in which ordinary food is not available but in which God's chosen people are sustained with divine bread and divine water... It is a world with sharply defined water boundaries: the Red Sea on one side, the river Jordan on the other. In order to enter this sacred other world, ordinary people need... divine intervention by which the water boundaries are made passable... Thus specified the Wilderness, the Other World of things sacred, is in every respect the exact converse of the profane world that is familiar to ordinary people conducting their ordinary secular affairs.⁴

Out of the cloud the voice of the Lord speaks, announcing that he has indeed heard Israel's complaints and will create a banquet of his own.

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "I have heard the grumblings of the sons of Israel; speak to them, saying, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread; and you shall know that I am the LORD your God.'" (16:11-12)

The terms twilight and morning are deliberate echoes of Israel's Passover, when at twilight the congregation killed the Passover lamb (12:6), and none of it was left until morning (12:10). Now, one month to the day after the Passover, God will miraculously replicate the feast

of meat and bread in the wilderness. In this way Israel will know that the Lord who brought them out of Egypt was now fully present in the wilderness. Such truth was later confirmed by David. Forced into a second exile in the wilderness, he wrote, "My soul is satisfied as with marrow and fatness" (Ps 63:5). God prepares his people a banqueting table in the wilderness. Have you experienced it?

D. The Wonder of a Feast (16:13-15)

So it came about at evening that the quails came up and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew evaporated, behold, on the surface of the wilderness there was a fine flake-like thing, fine as the frost on the ground. When the sons 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 which the LORD has given you to eat." (16:13-15)

In the evening, the miracle occurs as quails cover the camp, while in the morning, a flake-like substance surrounds it. Israel is completely enveloped in food. Here is double proof that the Creator cares for his people. As Houtman suggests, "freed from Pharaoh, Israel is now initiated into Yahweh's ordering of time."⁵

Like the miracle of bitter waters, this wonder is a mysterious combination of the natural, created order with the supernatural. Manna and quail are common to the Sinai Peninsula. There is a certain species of quail (*Coturnix coturnix*) that Nahum Sarna explains

migrates in huge flocks from Europe to central Africa in the autumn and returns in the spring. A short-tailed game bird of the pheasant family, it flies rapidly at very low altitudes. Due to the long distance involved, the migration is carried out in stages. The small quails twice each year land exhausted on the Mediterranean shore, where they can be easily captured by hand and by nets in great quantities. Their flesh and eggs are said to be delicious, and to this day they are prized food among the local population and are exported as a delicacy to Europe. The season of the year in which the Israelites encountered the quails fits in precisely with the bird's migratory pattern.⁶

Again we find the purpose of the wilderness is to give Israel an eye for the supernatural presence of God in the natural. This evokes a profound sense of awe and appreciation. When we lose that sense of awe in the ordinary, a demonic despair can dominate our lives.

The gift of manna, however, defies natural explanation. Something akin to it is well known in the mountainous regions of the Sinai. It arises from insects that infect the tamarisk bush. Sarna explains, "These scale insects suck the sap of the tamarisk, which is rich in carbohydrates, and excrete the surplus onto the twigs in the form of tiny globules that soon crystallize due to rapid evaporation and fall to the ground. They are very sweet and sticky, and are edible. They have to be collected before the heat rises, for then the ants get to them."⁷ But the extent of the daily manna is beyond anything ever witnessed in the Sinai, and the double portion on the day prior to the Sabbath also defies the natural order of things. We can sense Israel's incredulity at the first sight of it. She asks, "*Man hu?*" ("What is it?"), and thus the name stuck.

So now the wilderness is totally redefined as God has answered Israel's complaints. Israel complains about meat and God provides meat. Israel longs for bread and God provides bread. In a world where nothing grows, God has replicated the Passover feast precisely

one month after that first twilight. Rather than a place of death, the wilderness has become a storehouse of life.

Skipping ahead to the end of the chapter, we find that so significant was the wonder surrounding the bread that God wants to preserve its memory for every generation in Israel.

III. The “Remembrance” of the Bread (16:31-34)

The house of Israel named it manna, and it was like coriander seed, white, and its taste was like wafers with honey. Then Moses said, “This is what the LORD has commanded, ‘Let an omerful of it be kept throughout your generations, that they may see the bread that I fed you in the wilderness, when I brought you out of the land of Egypt.’” Moses said to Aaron, “Take a jar and put an omerful of manna in it, and place it before the LORD to be kept throughout your generations.” As the LORD commanded Moses, so Aaron placed (rested it) it before the Testimony, to be kept. (16:31-34)

Following the gift of bread to a murmuring Israel, the chapter ends with the bread being kept as an eternal memorial for all generations. It becomes sacramental in order to remind every generation of God’s generosity in the wilderness. In this way the painful memory of the bread of Egypt is replaced by the sweet memory of bread from heaven. The testimony was designed to drive out despair and inspire hope. If the Creator God generously provided for unfaithful Israel in the wilderness, how much more will he give to those who faithfully listen to his voice?

IV. Wonder Bread In the Early Church

Before we come to the Lord’s Table and eat of this bread, I would like to reflect on three things. First, we should be filled with absolute awe and gratitude for how privileged we are. What Israel experienced in the gift of manna was a mere shadow of the gift of God to us. After Jesus fed the five thousand in the wilderness, he explicitly told Israel:

“I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread which comes down out of heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread also which I will give for the life of the world is My flesh.” (John 6:48-51)

Because of the preciousness of Christ’s life, the early church made their meals sacred, making the Eucharist the climactic moment of their weekly love feasts. They knew they could experience the sacred whenever they met in the simplicity of a leisurely meal. We need to recover this with fervor. Our fast-track, fragmented culture that is fed by fast food chains and meals on the run creates more than poor health, it robs us of the sacred. Whether you are the head of your home or single and living with roommates, you need to carve out time each week when you can have a sacred meal and conclude it with communion. Most single people I know seldom take their meals together, and very few homes have a leisurely meal where the sacred presence of Christ is invited in. We are a most privileged people, but the question is, Do we feed on this bread?

Secondly, the early church was so well trained by Jesus and by the apostles that the life of God was found in the wilderness. When they experienced sufferings, they didn’t grumble like Israel of old, they rejoiced (Jas 1:2-4). In the New Testament, rejoicing replaces grumbling. They knew that God was enlarging their appetite to experience more and more of his glory. So Peter describes believers as those who “rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory” (1 Pet 1:6-9). It shouldn’t be any surprise to us then that the hallmark epistle of joy in the New Testament, Philippians, was written from a prison cell.

Thirdly, having experienced Christ’s life to the full, the early Christians so longed to keep their appetites pure, they voluntarily placed themselves under the discipline of fasting when seeking God’s mind and counsel on special occasions (Acts 13:2; 14:23). Fasting meant abstaining from fleshly appetites in order to be fed by the Spirit. And it was more than abstinence from food; they refrained also from sexual relations in marriage (1 Cor 7:5). In the modern world we have to be even more vigilant. With the advent of modern technology there seems to be no space or time where the world doesn’t intrude with its idols. Fasting for us means turning off the television, the computer and email, shutting off cell phones and beepers and physically removing ourselves to a quiet place where the world doesn’t speak; to a place where there are no commercials, no sports, no talk radio and no catalogues, nothing but silence and stillness. If Aaron were here today, this is what he would do so as to turn our face to the wilderness.

1. Edmund Leach, “Fishing for Men on the Edge of the Wilderness,” Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, eds., *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1987), 587.

2. Alter comments that the Hebrew syntax, “*and what are we? – not against us are your murmurings,*” . . . has a jagged and discontinuous look, and may be intended, as Benno Jacob suggests, to mimic Moses’ sense of perturbation in responding to the people’s accusation directed at him and Aaron.” Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: Norton, 2004), 407.

3. Walter Brueggemann, “Exodus,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 1:813.

4. Leach, “Fishing for Men,” 586-587.

5. Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus* (HCOT; Kampen: Kok, 1996), 2:323.

6. Nahum Sarna, *Exploring Exodus* (New York: Schocken, 1996), 119.

7. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus*, 117-118.

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