

## Thanksgiving Sermon: What is This?

Exodus 16:1-15/Philippians 2:14-15

**Even though Thanksgiving is about food for most Americans, it tends not to be a time for cooking adventures.** Most of us tend to go for the tried and true when it comes to turkey and pumpkin pie. In fact, most of us know well in advance what to expect on the table Thanksgiving Day.

**Today I want to put a new twist on an Old Testament story about food.** Our text reveals the setting of today's story comes out of the desert wanderings of God's people. Now I realize that the wilderness and desert doesn't sound much like a context for cooking. Therefore, it is necessary for us to use a little sanctified imagination as we talk about "Quail a la manna." So lets get started with our Thanksgiving story.

**The Hebrew people are on their long march between Egypt and the land of Canaan.** God gives them a wonderful experience of deliverance from bondage in Egypt. They walk through the sea on dry land, while Pharaoh's army is swallowed up in water. **They celebrate with singing and dancing.** We can read about the entire incident in Exodus 15.

**But euphoria quickly turns to complaint.** The mob of ex-slaves is tired and thirsty, so they pitch camp at Marah, where the water is bitter. In their complaining, God in His grace intervenes and sweetens the bitter waters.

**The next stopping place is Elim, a desert oasis with springs, palm trees and blue skies.** Today, Elim would probably have swimming pools, tennis courts, golf courses, and gourmet restaurants - sort of like a Middle Eastern Bermuda or Aruba or one of the Islands. It was everything tired hikers in the desert could ask for.

**But God doesn't let the Hebrews settle for long at the resort - like Elim. God makes them move out into the Desert of Sin.** What an ominous-sounding name! What a hard place this is, the Desert of Sin! The sun beats down and there is absolutely no shade to rest in.

**Water has to be rationed out.** And worst of all, there is no food! There is an old military saying, "An army marches on its stomach." So no food is really bad news!

**Pretty soon, from all corners of the Hebrew camp, you can hear the gripe leaders go into action.** Instead of cheerleaders, the Hebrews have gripe leaders. Soon, a chorus of complaints becomes a murmuring through the mob.

"Where do our leaders, Moses and Aaron, think they're taking us? Look, we were at that wonderful place, Elim. Why couldn't we stay there longer? Instead, we had to march out into this God-forsaken desert, where there's no shade, no water, no food."

Some begin to grumble: "Man, remember what it was like in good old Egypt? Remember the meat and fish and wonderful veggies of Egypt? It would have been better to die as slaves in Egypt than starve as free people in the desert. Moses and Aaron have brought us out here to starve to death. Down with Moses and Aaron!"

**It's only one month since the Hebrews saw God beat up on all the powers of Egypt with the 10 plagues.** Egypt was the greatest power in the world of that time. But in a contest of power, God wins hands down.

**It's only a month since the parting of the sea.** It's just a month since their great deliverance from Egypt. Only one month is all it takes to start the griping and groaning and grumbling.

**God finally spoke through His servant Moses.** "All right! All right! I've heard your grumbings already!" Actually, that is not exactly what God said. Moses actually said on God's behalf, "He has heard your grumbings." Three times in three verses, this short sentence, "He has heard your grumbings."

God then said, in essence, "If you want food, I'll give you food." **The next morning, all around the camp was heavy dew.** When the dew dried, a flaky substance appeared on the desert floor. The people looked around and said, "Manna." The Hebrew word translated "Manna" actually means, "What is it?"

In other words, the people got up in the morning, looked around, saw that flaky-stuff all over the ground and said, "What is this stuff?" And throughout history the name "Manna" has stuck when trying to explain the *nourishment* that God provided for His desert stricken people!

**Who knows what manna was really like?** Maybe it was something like honey-sweetened Cheerios. The Book of Numbers says that when ground into flour and made into cakes, manna tasted like wafers made with honey or like cakes baked in oil. Instead of manna-burgers, maybe they were like manna pancakes.

**Whatever it tasted like, manna was God's provision for human hunger.** It was sufficient and satisfying. Manna was the gracious gift of a good God.

Jesus made this statement in John 6:48, "I am the bread of life." **Jesus is today's manna.** Jesus is the satisfying provision for our hunger and thirst.

**But back to the wilderness.** That's where we go again and again in everyday life. So much of human life is lived in the wilderness. **When God said they were going to have manna, that's what they got.** Manna on Sunday, Monday, Tuesday and on through the week. And there was enough manna on Friday to last over the Saturday Sabbath so they wouldn't have to do the work of collecting manna on the Sabbath.

**I suspect they had manna straight and manna toasted.** They had manna cooked and manna plain. Songwriter Keith Green wrote a song about manna.

"And in the morning, it's manna hotcakes.  
We snack on manna all day.  
And they sure had a winner last night for dinner –  
Flaming manna soufflé."

**But if manna is all you get to eat, and if every day it's the same menu exactly, you likely to get tired of it and forget what a wonderful blessing manna really is.** Pretty soon, gripe leaders begin to stir up a chorus of complaint again, "Who can live on bread alone? Man, oh man, we remember all the good grub back in Egypt! What wouldn't we give for some fresh vegetables, even if it was broccoli?"

Numbers 11:6 records their complaint, "Now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!"

Finally, God said, basically, "You want meat, you'll get meat! You'll get meat 'til you're sick of it. You'll get meat 'til you can't stand that either." **Enter the quails!** Small birds are brought into the camp by the east wind. They fly low, roosting at night on the ground, easy to capture. **In the morning, it's no sweat to swat a basketful of quail.** Then, back to the tents and whatever Jewish mammas could make from a basketful of quail along with the ever-present manna.

**Quail was good for a while.** People like quail. Doesn't quail taste something like chicken? **The people praised God for quail.** But it wasn't long before some began asking if they couldn't just once have some tasty lamb stew or even some beef jerky. But it was just quail, roast quail, quail with manna. **And they start to grumble all over again.**

So why was it that the people of God grumbled? Why does anyone grumble? Very simply, we grumble because we forget. Grumbling is forgetfulness.

Grumbling for the Hebrews was forgetting how bad it was to be a slave in Egypt. Grumbling was forgetting how much they wanted out of there. Grumbling is forgetting the gracious acts of God to liberate us from bondage. Grumbling is forgetting God's promise of a new land, your own land. Grumbling is taking our eyes off the hope offered by God's promises. Grumbling can be selective forgetfulness - remembering only the good in the past and forgetting its trauma. This is like folks who long for the good old days, forgetting the way it really used to be. Grumbling is forgetfulness.

Maya Angelou, African-American poet, tells of whiners who would come into her grandmother's store in Arkansas. Grandma would always quietly beckon Maya to come closer. Then she would bait the customer with "How are you doing today, Brother Thomas?" As the complaining gushed forth, she would nod or make eye contact with her granddaughter to make sure Maya heard what was being said. As soon as the whiner left, her grandmother would ask Maya to stand in front of her. Then she would say the same thing she had said at least a thousand times: "Sister, did you hear what Brother So-and-So or Sister-Much-to-Do complained about? You heard that!" Maya would nod.

Grandma would continue, "Sister, there are people who went to sleep all over the world last night, poor and rich and white and black, but they will never wake up again. Sister, those who expected to rise did not... And those dead folks would give anything, anything at all for just five minutes of this weather or 10 minutes of that plowing that person was grumbling about. So you watch yourself about complaining, Sister."

Grandma would conclude: "What you're supposed to do when you don't like a thing is change it. If you can't change it, change the way you think about it. Don't complain."

Grumbling is forgetting the blessing of life itself and of life's simple benefits.

One of the worse things about grumbling is it can become a habit of life. We can make a habit of ignoring or forgetting God's goodness.

I remember when the economy was much better than what it is today and everybody who wanted to work pretty much had a job. And hardly a week passed that I didn't hear someone complaining about his or her job, or his or her boss, or the pay scale. Now that the economy has tumbled and factories

closed and jobs lost, hardly a week goes by that I don't hear someone complaining about not having a job, or the President, or politics in general.

**But look at the other side of grumbling.** While grumbling is *forgetfulness... thanksgiving is a response to grace.*

**The Exodus was the gracious act of a good and compassionate God.** The Hebrews had not earned God's goodness. They had forgotten the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob while suffering under Pharaoh. **But God remembered His covenant with their ancestors and delivered them from slavery.** The manna was a gift, an expression of God's grace. So was the quail. God was graciously providing, though not the way the Hebrews wanted.

**Thanksgiving is our response to grace.** On that very first Thanksgiving years ago the Pilgrims had suffered sickness, death, and unbearable conditions. But in the end they recognized God's hand on their lives and in their efforts! **In other words, Thanksgiving is responding to God's grace even in the midst of trouble!** That is why Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5:18, "In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." Not necessarily "for" "everything," but "in" every situation, give thanks for who God is.

**Ladies and Gentlemen, I submit to you today we are a blessed people!** God has given us a great *nation* - even with all her faults she is still the greatest nation on the face of the earth! God has given us a great *Church* - even with all of our imperfections she is still one of the greatest churches I have ever known and served! **God has given each of us some great friends who have "stepped in" when other have "stepped away!"** But most of all, we serve a great and awesome God Who looked past our faults and received us into His wonderful and amazing family! **We are a blessed people!**

If you are not saved, why not today?"

**Please stand for prayer.**

Father,

Your Word is true. Thank You for loving me and making me "more than a conqueror through (Christ) who loves me." In Jesus' name. Amen.