

VII xiv

A Land Flowing With Milk and Honey

What happens when a rescued people starts rewriting the place it was rescued from.

NUMBERS 16:13 (LSB) · A STUDY ON GRUMBLING, MEMORY, AND WHO WE ARE ACTUALLY TALKING TO

“Is it not enough that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey to have us die in the wilderness, but you would also lord it over us?”

NUMBERS 16:13, LSB

Let me be honest about why this lesson gets under my skin. Complaining is the one sin I can commit without feeling like I sinned. I can grumble my way through a whole afternoon and never once think of it as a spiritual problem. Then I read this verse, where a rescued people calls the house of slavery “a land flowing with milk and honey,” and I realized my memory does the exact same trick when I am unhappy.

What the passage says

Dathan and Abiram say this to Moses from inside the camp of the redeemed. They are refusing a summons, and this is their reason. Read it slowly, because the sentence contains something most readers slide past.

“A land flowing with milk and honey” is not a figure of speech they invented. It is God’s own phrase, spoken at the burning bush before a single plague fell: “So I have come down to deliver them from the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey” (Exodus 3:8). Scripture uses that phrase for one place. Canaan. The promise.

Dathan and Abiram take the phrase God reserved for the destination and staple it onto the house of slavery. Egypt is now the land flowing with milk and honey, and the wilderness road to the actual one is a plot to kill them.

That is the tension worth sitting with. This is not a bad mood. It is a rewrite. And it is the end point of a pattern that started the week they walked out of Egypt.

What Egypt actually was

What the text records. Exodus 1 describes taskmasters, forced labor, and lives made bitter with hard service in mortar and bricks and in all kinds of labor in the field. It says the Egyptians used them ruthlessly. Then it records Pharaoh's standing order in verse 22: every son who is born, throw into the Nile.

What God saw. Exodus 2:23-25 is the hinge of the whole book. The sons of Israel groaned because of the bondage and cried out, and their cry for help ascended to God. God heard their groaning, and He remembered His covenant, and God saw the sons of Israel, and God knew.

What they later said it was. Watch the memory improve as the distance grows. In Exodus 16:3, six weeks out, it is pots of meat and bread to the full. In Numbers 11:5, more than a year out, the fish was free, and there were cucumbers and melons and leeks and onions and garlic. By Numbers 16:13 it is a land flowing with milk and honey. Memory does not fade here. It gets better.

The detail that makes it dangerous. That produce list is accurate. Those are genuine staples of Nile agriculture, and the diet of Egyptian laborers is well attested. The lie is not in the menu. The lie is in what got deleted. They remember the fish and forget the river they were told to throw their sons into. The word "free" is the tell. It was not free. It cost them their children and it cost them their backs.

A note worth being careful about. None of this makes it sin to tell God that something hurts. Exodus 2 shows God answering a groan before anyone asked Him to, and Scripture is full of raw complaint brought straight to Him: Job, Habakkuk, Lamentations, a third of the Psalms, and Christ Himself in Gethsemane and from the cross. The Hebrew makes a distinction worth noticing. The word for what Israel did in Egypt is groaning, an outcry under suffering, and God answered it. The word used again and again in Exodus and Numbers is a different one, usually rendered grumbling or murmuring, and it is consistently something done about God rather than to Him. Lament faces God with the trouble. Grumbling turns away from Him and talks to everyone else about His character. Do not use this lesson to shame people who are grieving.

The record

Laid out in order, with what they said and what Yahweh did. It is a short book of the Bible worth of the same conversation, roughly a dozen times.

1 Trapped at the sea (Exodus 14:11-12).

"Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?"

No rebuke of the people at all. He splits the sea and destroys the army.

2 Bitter water at Marah (Exodus 15:22-26).

"What shall we drink?"

A tree cast into the water makes it sweet, and He names Himself: "I, Yahweh, am your healer." Then He leads them to twelve springs and seventy palms.

3 Hunger in the Wilderness of Sin (Exodus 16).

“Would that we had died by Yahweh’s hand in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat.”

Quail that evening, bread from heaven the next morning, and every morning for forty years. No judgment.

4 No water at Rephidim (Exodus 17:1-7).

“Why, now, have you brought us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?” Moses says they are nearly ready to stone him.

Water out of the rock at Horeb. The place is named Massah and Meribah for the question they asked: “Is Yahweh among us, or not?”

5 The golden calf (Exodus 32).

“As for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.”

He relents at Moses’ intercession, the Levites put about three thousand to the sword, and He strikes the people with a plague.

6 Taberah (Numbers 11:1-3).

The content is not recorded. Only that they complained of adversity in the hearing of Yahweh.

Fire burns at the edge of the camp until Moses prays. The place is named Burning.

7 Kibroth-hattaavah (Numbers 11:4-34).

“Who will give us meat to eat? We remember the fish which we used to eat free in Egypt... there is nothing at all to look at except this manna.”

Meat for a month, until it comes out of their nostrils. While it is still between their teeth, a severe plague. The place is named Graves of Craving.

8 Miriam and Aaron (Numbers 12).

“Has Yahweh indeed spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us as well?”

He summons all three, vindicates Moses, and strikes Miriam leprous. Seven days outside the camp after Moses cries out for her.

9 The spies at Kadesh (Numbers 13-14).

“Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness!” Then: let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt.

The ten spies die by plague. Everyone twenty and older is sentenced to die in the wilderness over forty years, a year for each day the land was spied out.

1 Korah, Dathan, and Abiram (Numbers 16).

0 *“You have gone far enough... why do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of Yahweh?” And the line at the top of this study.*

The ground opens, fire consumes the two hundred fifty with censers, and when the congregation blames Moses the next day, a plague kills fourteen thousand seven hundred before Aaron’s censer stops it.

1 Meribah of Kadesh (Numbers 20:1-13).

1 *“It is not a place of seed or figs or vines or pomegranates, nor is there water to drink.”*

Water comes abundantly, but Moses strikes the rock he was told to speak to, and he and Aaron are shut out of the land.

1 The road around Edom (Numbers 21:4-9).

2 *“There is no food and no water, and we loathe this miserable food.”*

Fiery serpents, and many die. Then a bronze serpent on a standard, and whoever looks lives.

One pattern the text puts on the surface. Everything before Sinai gets provision with no penalty. Hunger gets bread. Thirst gets water. Panic at the sea gets a rescue and not one word of correction. Everything after Sinai gets judgment. Same complaints, same shortages, same wording in places. What changed was not God’s patience with hungry people. What changed was that a covenant had been ratified, and the people grumbling had stood at the mountain and said we will do everything Yahweh has spoken.

Why this is hard

We file complaining under personality. He is a negative guy. She has had a rough year. It is treated as a mood, or at worst a bad habit, and it is the one sin most of us can commit in church parking lots without any sense that we have done anything.

Scripture files it somewhere else entirely. Moses says it flatly in Exodus 16, and it is the interpretive key to all twelve of these episodes.

Who they were actually talking to

“For what are we? Your grumblings are not against us but against Yahweh.”

EXODUS 16:8, LSB

They thought the conversation was about logistics, and they thought they were having it with management. Moses tells them where it is actually landing.

He is not being dramatic. Look at what the sentences actually claim. You brought us out here to kill us. That is not a statement about the water supply. It is a statement about the intentions of the God who had just split the sea in front of them, and it is the same charge every time, for forty years, almost word for

word. Exodus 17:7 finally says the quiet part out loud: Is Yahweh among us, or not? That question is sitting underneath every one of these episodes. The shortage was only ever the occasion for asking it.

So here is the plain takeaway, and it is the one that costs me something every time: a complaint is a sermon. Whether you meant to preach or not, everyone in earshot just heard you say something about what God is like, how much He can be trusted, and whether He is actually present. Your children hear it. Your spouse hears it. The person you are discipling hears it. And Yahweh hears it, which is the part Israel kept forgetting.

The graves of craving

Numbers 11 is where this gets uncomfortable, because it is the episode where God gives them precisely what they asked for.

Read what they say about the manna: there is nothing at all to look at except this manna. Nothing at all. This is bread that appears on the ground every morning without fail, that they did not plant, water, harvest, or pay for, that Exodus 16 calls bread from heaven and that God explicitly gave so they would know He is Yahweh their God. They call it nothing.

And He answers the request. Not with a lecture. With meat, a month of it, until it comes out of their nostrils and becomes loathsome to them. While it is still between their teeth the plague falls, and they bury a generation of cravers in a place they name Graves of Craving. Psalm 106:15 reads the whole thing back in a single line: He gave them their request, and sent leanness with it. The request was granted, and the granting was the judgment.

Then look at what they do ten chapters later. They loathe the bread again, serpents come into the camp, and the cure God gives them is to look at a bronze image of the very thing that is killing them. Hold onto that. It comes back at the end.

How it ended

This is the part that should stop the room. At Kadesh in Numbers 14, standing at the edge of the land, the congregation says: Would that we had died in this wilderness!

God's answer in verses 28 and 29 is not a rebuttal. It is an echo. As they have spoken in His hearing, so He will do to them. Their corpses will fall in that wilderness, every one of them numbered from twenty years old and upward. They asked for it in so many words, and He granted the request verbatim.

Verse 22 gives the reason and the count. They have seen His glory and His signs, and they have put Him to the test these ten times and have not listened to His voice. Ten. Not one bad night. A pattern with a number on it.

The New Testament refuses to let this stay a story about somebody else. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10 that these things happened as examples and were written for our instruction, and he lists grumbling right alongside idolatry and immorality. Hebrews 3 says they could not enter because of unbelief, and then turns

and says: today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as at Massah and Meribah. Jude 5 reminds his readers that the Lord who saved a people out of Egypt afterward destroyed those who did not believe.

That last one is the sentence to sit with. Coming out of Egypt was never the finish line. An entire generation was delivered, fed, led by fire, and buried in the sand between the rescue and the promise.

Living it out

The danger this passage names is not blasphemy. Nobody in these chapters denies that Yahweh exists. They watched Him work. The danger is a rescued person quietly reassessing the rescue.

It shows up in ordinary ways, and I catch myself in most of them. Comparing the present season to a version of the past that never happened. Calling the provision you have “nothing at all” because it is not the provision you pictured. Talking about God in the third person to people who cannot do anything about it, instead of talking to Him. Finding a Moses to blame so you never have to name who you are actually upset with. Treating a delay as evidence of malice. Asking, in the middle of a hard stretch, whether He is even in this, and then acting on the answer you assumed.

The tell is nostalgia for a place God dragged you out of. If you find yourself remembering the fish and never the river, you already know what is happening.

A deeper study: the grumbling thread through Scripture

- **Exodus 1:8-22 and 2:23-25:** what Egypt actually was, and the groan God answered.
- **Exodus 3:7-8:** the phrase “a land flowing with milk and honey,” and who it belongs to.
- **Exodus 14:10-14; 15:22-26; 16:1-12; 17:1-7:** the four pre-Sinai complaints and the four provisions.
- **Exodus 16:8:** the verse that tells you where a complaint lands.
- **Exodus 19:8 and 24:3-8:** the covenant they agreed to, which is the line everything after this crosses.
- **Numbers 11:** Taberah, Kibroth-hattaavah, and Moses’ own complaint in verses 11-15, which God answers with help instead of judgment. Ask why.
- **Numbers 13-14:** the spies, the sentence, and the ten times.
- **Numbers 16:12-14:** Egypt renamed.
- **Numbers 20:1-13 and 21:4-9:** the two that cost Moses the land and the one that points to the cross.
- **Deuteronomy 8:2-5:** Moses’ own interpretation of the forty years, including why the manna was there.
- **Psalms 78 and Psalm 106:** the wilderness told back as worship, with the failures left in.
- **Psalms 95:7-11:** today, if you hear His voice.
- **1 Corinthians 10:1-13:** written for our instruction, grumbling included.
- **Hebrews 3:7-4:11:** unbelief as the thing that kept them out.
- **Jude 5:** saved out of Egypt, destroyed for not believing.
- **Philippians 2:12-16:** do all things without grumbling, set next to the obedience of Christ in verses 5-11.
- **John 6:31-58:** the true bread from heaven, and the crowd that grumbles about Him by name.

Your challenge this week

Name your Egypt. Write down one season, job, relationship, or habit God brought you out of that you have started remembering fondly. Then write down, honestly, what it actually cost you. Put both lists side by side.

Find the manna you are calling nothing. Name one specific provision in your life right now that you have stopped seeing because it is not the version you asked for. Thank God for it out loud, by name, once a day this week.

Track where your complaints go. For seven days, notice who hears it first. If it consistently reaches three people before it reaches God, that is the whole diagnosis.

Change the address, not the volume. Take the hardest thing you are carrying and say it to God with the same bluntness you would use with a friend. Read Psalm 88 first if you need permission. Lament is not the sin here.

Read Numbers 11 through 14 in one sitting, then read Hebrews 3:7 through 4:11 immediately after. Watch the writer of Hebrews aim it at people who are already saved.

Ask one person. Give someone who is around you often permission to tell you what your complaining is teaching them about God. Then do not argue with the answer.

The Gospel underneath it

A generation was rescued from slavery, fed by God every single morning, led by fire, and still died in the sand, because deliverance out of Egypt is not the same thing as a heart that trusts the One who did it.

Then another Israel goes into the wilderness. Forty days instead of forty years, no bread at all, tested at the same points, and He does not accuse His Father once. Where they said we remember Egypt, He said man shall not live on bread alone. He was hungry and did not grumble. He was thirsty on a cross and asked for nothing but the fulfillment of Scripture. Philippians 2 puts the command not to grumble a few verses after the description of the One who was obedient to the point of death, and that order is not an accident.

And the bronze serpent is still standing there in Numbers 21, put up for people who had just called God's bread miserable. They did not earn the cure and they were not asked to fix their attitude first. They were told to look. Jesus picked up that exact image in John 3:14: as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that whoever believes will have eternal life.

So the answer to a grumbling heart is not a better attitude. It is a new one, given by the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is Himself the bread that came down out of heaven and never gets old. Look at Him and live. Then keep walking, and stop appraising Him by the supply line.