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WHY MURMUR WHEN YOU SHOULD BE GRATEFUL?

Today's Text: Exodus Chapters 16-17

Extracts:

“And the whole congregation of the children of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness: and the children of Israel said unto them, would to God we had died in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the flesh pots, and when we did eat bread to the full; for ye have brought us forth into this wilderness, to kill this whole assembly with hunger. Then said the Lord unto Moses, behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you.... And the children of Israel did eat manna forty years, until they came to a land inhabited; they did eat manna, until they came unto the borders of Canaan”
[Ex. 16: 2-4, 35]

*In Charles Dickens' famous novel, **Oliver Twist**, the principal character of the same name found himself in an orphanage where the inmates were served poor and insufficient rations of food. However, nobody was bold enough to complain aloud about it. One day, under the instigation of one bully among them, timid Oliver Twist said to the officer serving the food, “Please, Sir, I want some more.” Before Oliver knew it, the serving ladle [a big wooden spoon] had landed on his head! To date, anybody who is not satisfied with what he/she has been given is called “Oliver Twist!”*

In a way, when it comes to our attitude to God's blessings, most believers are Oliver Twists. We are always murmuring, that is, expressing in gloomy and unhopeful language our disappointment with what we have received, especially when it turns out to be less than or different from what we had expected. An unemployed person who is blessed with a temporary appointment murmurs why it is not a permanent job. A barren woman who is miraculously blessed with a pretty baby-girl wonders why it is not a boy or twins [a boy and a girl]. A careless driver who has been saved from a terrible accident blames God for allowing him to lose his right hand. The list is endless.

Murmuring is dangerous because it is a mark of ingratitude. Why then do we keep doing it, and how can we deal with it? In today's lesson, we shall study the conduct of the children of Israel after God had miraculously taken them through the Red Sea.

1. Background

Last week, we saw how God took the children of Israel through the Red Sea, which we found to be analogous to the baptism of water and the Holy Spirit [1 Cor. 10:1-2]. They were now on the Canaan side of the Red Sea, heading towards the Promised Land. However, contrary to their expectations, they encountered more “inconveniences”. Let us look at them in sequence:

a) *Thirst*

Three days from the shores of the Red Sea, they ran out of water. They found water at Marah but it was bitter. What did they do? “And the people murmured against Moses, saying, what shall we drink?” Moses cried to God who showed him a tree to cast into the waters. The bitter waters of Marah became sweet, and the people drank [Ex. 15: 22-25].

In our daily walk, we encounter one kind of thirst or the other. We are thirsty for success in our work, profession, marriage, ministry, etc. Of course, we do know that a greater proportion of the people on earth lack basic drinking water. As a result of ecological changes, places that used to have rains are now dry, and people and animals are facing death from drought. So, we are still much better than most people. Believers even have a higher hope because Jesus has promised, “whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life” [Jn 4:14].

b) *Hunger*

Six weeks after departing from Egypt, the people came to the wilderness of Sin, which was between Elim and Sinai. Then, they started complaining again, this time of hunger. Listen to what came out of their mouths:

And the children of Israel said unto them [Moses and Aaron], would to God we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the flesh pots, and when we did eat bread to the full; for ye have brought us forth into this wilderness, to kill this whole assembly with hunger [Ex. 16:3]

Again, God showed mercy toward them and rained down heavenly food, manna, for the forty-year period of their wilderness experience, and “he that gathered much had nothing over, and he that gathered little had no lack; they gathered every man according to his eating” [Ex. 16:18].

c) *Thirst again*

Far into the wilderness at Rephidim, the children of Israel encountered another water shortage. This time, they were quite vicious with Moses.

And the people thirsted there for water; and the people murmured against Moses, and said, wherefore is this that thou hast brought us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our cattle with thirst? And Moses cried unto the Lord, saying, what shall I do unto this people? They be almost ready to stone me [Ex. 17: 3-4]

God commanded Moses to take the elders of Israel and his rod to Horeb. There, the Lord Himself would stand upon “the rock in Horeb, and thou shalt smite the rock, there shall come water out of it, that the people may drink” [vv. 5-6]. Moses struck the rock and water gushed out for the people and their flock.

In **1 Cor. 10: 1-4**, Paul drew our attention to this story as follows:

*Moreover, brethren, I would not that ye should be ignorant, how that all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; and were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea; and did all eat the same spiritual meat; and did all drink the same spiritual drink, for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and **that Rock was Christ***

Wait a minute. If that rock was the Pre-incarnate Christ who came in flesh as Jesus [**Jn 1:14**], is that why God asked Moses to strike the rock only once [analogous to the crucifixion of Jesus] and to speak to it the next time [**Num. 20:7-8**] [analogous to receiving from God through Christ]? Amazing!

d) *War*

The people of Amalek fought with Israel in Rephidim. However, Moses moved quickly to deal with the situation, before the murmuring began. He chose the men of war led by Joshua to go out to fight, while he went to the top of the hill with the rod of God in his hand. When Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed, but when he brought it down, Amalek prevailed. Soon, however, Moses got tired. So, to sustain Israel’s victory, Aaron and Hur put stones under each of Moses’ hands to keep them up. That way, the people of Israel prevailed [**Ex. 17: 8-16**]!

The children of Israel continued murmuring for forty years! However, let us stop here for today because we are not going beyond Exodus Chapter 17.

2. God’s reaction to the murmuring

Why did the people murmur against God? It could have been due to fear or impatience or ingratitude. However, *their limited knowledge of God could have been a major factor*, for those who know their God shall be strong and do exploits [Dan. 11:32]. So, if it appears that, at the beginning, God was lenient with the children of Israel, it was because they did not as yet know Him, for “surely the Lord God will do nothing but [unless] He revealeth His secret unto His servants the prophets” [Amos 3:7]. Therefore, God used every occasion of the people’s murmuring to reveal a character of Himself as follows:

a) *Jehovah-Rophi*

After healing the bitter waters of Marah to become sweet and drinkable, God revealed Himself to Moses and the people as “the Lord that healeth thee,” Jehovah-Rophi [Ex. 16:26]. This character was later more fully revealed in Jesus Christ “by whose stripes ye were healed” [1 Pet. 2:24].

b) *Jehovah-Jireh*

When young Isaac asked his father where was the lamb for the sacrifice, since they only brought along with them “the wood of the burnt offering,” his father replied, “My son, God will provide Himself a lamb for a burnt offering” [Gen. 22: 6-7]. As Abraham was about to sacrifice his son, in obedience to God’s command, the angel of the Lord stopped him and showed him a lamb caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham sacrificed the lamb in place of Isaac, “and Abraham called the name of that place Jehovah-Jireh” [vv. 9-14], which means God will provide.

When the children of Israel were thirsty, God gave them water to drink. When they were hungry, He gave them manna from heaven, which sustained them for forty years [Ex. 16: 35]. Jesus explained this matter more clearly as follows:

Verily, verily, I say unto you, Moses gave you not that bread from heaven; but My Father giveth you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is He which cometh down from heaven, and giveth light to the world... I am the bread of life: he that cometh to Me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on Me shall never thirst [Jn 6:32-35]

c) *Jehovah-Nissi*

The children of Israel called on the name of God when the people of Amalek made war on them. Under the banner of the Lord, the children of Israel defeated their enemies. So, “Moses built an altar, and called the name of it Jehovah-Nissi,” God is our banner [Ex. 17:15]. The Psalmist writes, “He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide

under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, He is my refuge and my fortress: my God; in Him I trust” [Ps. 91: 1-2].

Our faith in Jesus has given us the banner of God for as Jesus has assured us, “I am the way, the truth and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by Me. If ye had known Me, ye should have known My Father also; and from henceforth ye know Him, and have seen Me” [Jn 14:6-7]. Consequently, we are now more than conquerors through Jesus who has loved us [Rom. 8:37].

After God had revealed Himself to the children of Israel as discussed above, He began to punish their murmuring. They had no more excuses for it other than ingratitude and lack of faith in Him. For example, later when they complained over the manna, and desired fresh meat, “the anger of the Lord was kindled greatly; Moses also was displeased” [Num. 11: 10]. They got the fresh meat that they wanted but “the Lord smote the people with a very great plague” [v. 33]. Also, for believing the evil report of ten of the twelve spies sent by Moses to check out the Promised Land, and murmuring against Moses and Aaron, even threatening to replace them with new leaders to take them back to Egypt, God swore, “Surely, they shall not see the land which I swear unto their fathers, neither shall any of them that provoked Me see it” [Num. 14: 1-23].

In like manner, those who have received Jesus, “to them gave He power to become sons of God, even to them that believe on His name” [Jn 1:12]. But, whoever does not believe is “condemned already because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God” [Jn 3:18].

3. Lessons

When one of the Apostles, Philip, asked Jesus to show them His Father, He answered, “he that hath seen Me hath seen the Father” [Jn 14: 9]. In other words, the true character of God has been fully revealed in Jesus [Heb. 1:1-2]. Therefore, we have no more excuses to murmur after God has blessed us. We stand the danger of receiving “just recompense” [Heb. 2:2] for such an attitude or conduct. So, how do we deal with the problem? Here are some suggestions:

a) *Learn to be satisfied with what you receive*

We only know what we *want*. Only God knows what we need [Matt. 6:25-32]. Therefore, He will only grant us what we need. We saw in the story of manna from heaven that “he that gathered much hath *nothing over*, and he that gathered little *had no lack*: they gathered *every man according to his eating*” [Ex. 16:18]. Agur, the son of Jakeh, asked the Lord for two things before his death, “Remove far from me vanity and lies; *give me neither poverty nor riches*; feed me with food convenient for

me. Lest I be full, and deny Thee, and say, who is the Lord? Or lest I be poor, and steal, and take the name of my God in vain” [Prov. 30:7-9].

b) *In everything give thanks*

Unfortunately, many of us do not know how to thank other people for what they have done for us, not to talk of thanking God for His numerous blessings that we receive each day. The fact that we woke up this morning is a major blessing, but did we thank God for it? Therefore, the first habit that a believer should learn is to give thanks always and for every and anything. We are told, “In every thing give thanks; for that is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you” [1 Thes. 5:18].

After Job had lost his family and wealth, he “fell down upon the ground and worshipped, and said, naked came I out of my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return thither; the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; *blessed be the name of the Lord*” [Job 1:20-21]. David did not go about blaming God for his ordeal with Saul. Instead, he rejoiced, saying, “I will love Thee, O Lord, my strength. The Lord is my rock, and my fortress and my deliverer: my God, my strength, in whom I will trust; my buckler, and the horn of my salvation, and my high tower” [Ps. 18:1]. So, it is in praise, worship and thanksgiving that God will save us from all our enemies.

4. Conclusion

James has advised, “Is any among you afflicted? Let him pray. Is any merry? Let him sing psalms. Is any sick among you? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord” [Jam. 5: 13-14]. When we feel pain, physical, emotional or spiritual, it is natural to cry out. However, let it not be murmuring against God or other people. God is pleased with those who believe in Him, and rewards those that diligently seek Him [Heb. 11:6]. Therefore, no matter your circumstances in life, stop murmuring against God and start trusting and thanking Him. Your blessings are around the corner.