

# Food in the Desert

a sermon

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Exodus 16:2–15

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Moses had a tough job.

It wasn't a job he had asked for. He'd filled out no application, had no interviews.

No, he had this job because it was given to him. By God.

And God didn't take "No" for an answer.

The job Moses had was that of a leader. He was the leader of a great many people. Sometimes they were called "Israelites," and sometimes they were called "Hebrews," but whatever they were called, they were: twelve tribes held as slaves in Egypt. And then Leader Moses, doing his leader-y thing, his unasked for and unwelcome yet God-given job, he led those people.

I'm sure a lot could be said about *how* Moses led them. There are, no doubt, a lot of lessons we could learn from Moses: his leadership philosophy, his management style. But not *how* he led them but *where* he led them is what is important to note here. He led them out of slavery, out of bondage, out of Egypt.

Now Moses was just the point person. His leader-y job was not to do all the work himself, especially not the big deal, huge things. The freeing stuff, the releasing them from slavery stuff, that was God's job. *God* freed them, appointing Moses to lead them as God directed.

So now Moses led them, and led them on their way. For they were, on their way, that is:

from Egypt,  
from all they had known before,  
to ... well, to where, exactly?

Because Moses leading them *from* somewhere is all well and good. But where was he leading them *to*?

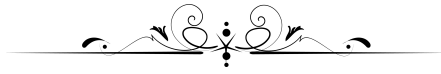
Sure, they had been given an answer. But it wasn't entirely satisfactory.

They were on their way to their own land. That's what leader Moses told them as he led them.

But the thing is, they didn't know their own land. None of them had ever been there. It had been *generations* since the Hebrew people had resided in the region of Galilee. Not since Joseph brought his family to Egypt during a famine, over four hundred and thirty years before, had any of the children of Israel been to the land of their ancestors. It's likely that no one among the twelve tribes at the time of the Exodus had ever *seen*

the place to which they were now going,  
the place to which they were being led,  
the place their leader had told them was their homeland.

How can it be home if it's never been your own?



So now they made a long slog through difficult terrain, from a land of bondage to a land of promise, from the known to the unknown.

It was a journey every step of which was dogged with questions.

“Where are we going?”

“How long will it take?”

“What’s there to eat?”

“What’s there to drink?”

And the all time favorite: “Are we there yet?”

The Israelites were full of questions, dumping these on Moses every day. The grumbling, the complaining, the murmuring, the moaning: this is what Moses heard so often, a rumble of discontent wrapping around him constantly.

Poor Moses.

The subterranean murmur

of the dissatisfied,  
the hungry,  
the thirsty,  
the worried,  
the fearful,  
the angry:

these all surrounded Moses every day, filling his ears, filling every waking moment, with an inescapable din of negativity and threat.

Sometimes, though, the murmuring wasn’t just in the background. Sometimes, it didn’t merely rumble. Every so often it burst out into the open and roared.

“Why didn’t we die in Egypt, rather than die here?”

We all die anyway, at some point.

In Egypt we had meat,  
wonderfully seasoned meat,  
braised for hours in pots.

And we had bread:  
so much bread we could stuff ourselves  
and there’d still be more left.

Here, there’s no meat anywhere;  
no bread, either.

Here, we’ll die of starvation.

What’s the point?

Why, oh why, did we ever leave Egypt?”

Of course, they weren’t remembering how things really were in Egypt. They didn’t recall all that was bad, all that was horrific. They weren’t remembering

the forced labor,  
the daily humiliation,  
the constant dehumanization,  
the arbitrary punishments,  
the random executions,

all those things that come from being a captive and enslaved people. They weren't remembering those things. And they weren't remembering that *God* took them away from all of that. They didn't remember that God had set them free.

And if they didn't remember *that* God had freed them, then they certainly didn't remember *why* God had freed them:

To show the glory of God.

To demonstrate God's power.

To set them apart.

To make them God's *own* people, a mighty nation to be a light to all other nations.

But at this moment, they weren't remembering any of that, and they weren't acting much like God's own people.

They murmured.

They grumbled.

They whined.

They complained.

They looked on the past with rose-colored glasses. And they looked on the present with scorn, with fear, with an utter lack of faith.



That's really what it was: a lack of faith.

In whom?

In themselves? Nah.

In Moses? Wrong again.

It was a lack of faith in God, of course.

They did not believe that the God of yesterday's miracles would work miracles today.

They did not believe that the God of liberation would also be the God of salvation.

They did not believe that God's love for them was constant.

They did not believe that the God who freed them would also feed them.

Poor Moses. He was at his wits' end. These thousands of people were hungry and grumpy. *He* knew the power of the Lord God; he thought *they'd* know it by now, too. *He* was devoted to the Lord God; he thought *they'd* be devoted, too. Instead, fear and desperation had blunted their trust and stilled their faith. And things were about to go sideways.

Until God stepped in.

God answers their grumbling with bread. God responds to their fear with food. On that day of pining for the past and whining about the present, God shows the Israelites — again — the power and majesty of this, their God. God gives them food in the desert.

At twilight, the quail came. Great flocks of birds, squat and plump and not too swift, they landed in the midst of the encampment — looks like dinner! — and all the people needed to do was go out and scoop up a few, enough to feed the family.

And then, the next morning, again the unexpected provision of God. A white, flaky, slightly sweet substance is left on the ground with the morning dew. What is it? Well, they didn't really know what it was. Later, that's what they ended up calling it: *Manna*. "What-is-it." All they needed to do was gather it up, form it into cakes, and bake it.

God provided them food in the desert. And God showed the people (not for the first time nor for the last):

that the love of God is constant, delivered to them in the evening and in the morning;

that the power of God is immense, able to call forth sustenance for them out of the sky and onto the ground.

that the God of yesterday's miracles would work miracles today;

that the God who freed them would also feed them.



My friends, the love of God *is* constant. The power of God *is* immense. And at times when we most despair of the constancy of God's love or the extent of God's power, when our faith is weakest and our capacity for belief is at its lowest, then God will provide what we most need at that moment.

The quail will come, and the manna will fall.

It may not be exactly the provision you were hoping for.

Perhaps you were wanting something sweet, for delicacies rich and decadent.

Then the quail will come, and the manna will fall.

Perhaps you had a plan for how you would live, for how things would go, a plan that (shockingly) is not turning out as planned.

Then the quail will come, and the manna will fall.

Maybe you wonder, you speculate, that things would be better for you, easier for you, if pleasing and serving God were no longer your concern, if Jesus were just an idea rather than your savior and lord.

Then the quail will come, and the manna will fall.

There are times when we all hunger for what we do not have and when we crave what we cannot have. There are times when envy has spoiled our appetites. There are times when resentment gives us a hankering for spiritual junk food.

Then the quail will come, and the manna will fall.

A times you may even hunger for a fantasy life, a post-faith life, thinking that it would feel so liberating to be unburdened by religious faith. You might then dream of the flesh-pots of Egypt and the bread of which you took your fill. "Oh, how much better I dined, when God

and Jesus  
and confession  
and discipleship

never entered the picture!”

Then, even then, the quail will come, and the manna will fall. You will find, from the hand of God, food in the desert.

God’s grace is sufficient for all your shortcomings and offenses. God’s will is for you to show forth God’s glory. So God will give you all you need to fulfill your God-given mission. God will give you food in the desert:

an unexpected word of loving encouragement;  
a bag of groceries by the door;  
a meal prepared by friends;  
an hour of patient listening without judgment;  
an open door to unexpected opportunities;  
burdens lifted,  
anxieties relieved;  
worship both healing and reorienting.

The quail will come, and the manna will fall.  
The God of yesterday’s miracles will work miracles today.  
The God of liberation will also be the God of salvation.  
The God who freed you will also feed you.  
And you will find food in the desert.