

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Christina Gibson

The Habit of Trust

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15

August 4, 2024

In our house, we do not usually have the TV on, and it's not because we are super productive, it's just... no—that's it. We are productive people. But we don't usually have it on, but every four years, we do have the TV on. This is an exception because Brett Gibson loves some Olympics. He loves the women's gymnastics and the track events and the swimming... and truly appreciates like few people I know the greatness of the athletes--- just their ability and their giftedness. Recently, he has become fixated on the idea that there needs to be an addition to the existing competition. He feels so strongly that in order for us to truly appreciate the athleticism and skill and excellence presented by the Olympians that each sport needs what he calls a regular participant, for contrast purposes.

In case you're curious, a regular participant is someone who has average athleticism and decent speed, mild-to-moderate flexibility, mediocre strength, and a non-Michael Phelps wingspan. It's impressive, of course, when we see Simone Biles leap into the air 11.8 feet, but even more impressive when right next to her you see this girl jumping 11.8 inches. Sign the petition in the narthex.

So, reading passages in the Old Testament like our Exodus 16 passage that Olive read today when I see this great work of God in which he's delivering the Israelites from slavery and hearing their cries and coming down and in miraculous ways, taking them out of an impossible situation to bring them to a land of their own. And we see this God who is not at all regular, and in contrast of Israel—the Israelites were definitely in the regular people. They are the regular ones in this story of God's redemptive and salvific work in the world. And perhaps we want to criticize them for their lack of faith or their constant forgetfulness, but maybe that's a part of being human---the non-elite, regular people. It's easy to see that doubting and the grumbling nature of the Israelites when we read it in the context of the profound ways in which God has rescued ourselves.

The people of Israel had been slaves in Egypt for generations, oppressed by Pharaoh, who not only forced them into hard labor but also murdered their sons. And then, Yahweh comes down, after paying attention and listening, and rescues them through incredible signs of power and strength. From the beginning, God's involvement with the Israelites was unconventional. He rescued Israel with plagues or signs—the frogs and gnats and water

turned to blood—and then, God leads them out of Egypt, not in boats but across the ground of the sea, as water formed a wall on both their right and their left. And even after this, the path to the promised land was unexpected as God did not lead them in the most direct route. He was afraid that they would see their enemies and be afraid of war and want to go back to Egypt. So instead, God lead them on the roundabout way through the wilderness. God may have been trustworthy and constant, but God was not predictable. God was not ordinary or regular.

But in Exodus 16, as we catch up, we watch the ways in which God continues to move in the lives of these people—not just rescuing them from Egypt but delivering them to the wilderness. Scripture tells us that he brought them out fo Egypt on eagles' wings to bring them to himself. So in Exodus 16, these regular people were hungry and angry---"hangry" as some say. We don't know how long its been since their last meal, but we know that they're hungry enough to complain. They had their feet in the wilderness, but they still had the mindset of Egypt---they were people of God, but they didn't know quite how to be the people that they already were.

In Egypt, they were used to punishment, not provision. They didn't know how to belong; instead, they knew how to be owned. While they were in slavery, they couldn't trust, they couldn't relax, there was not break. They had a constant fear of a very real enemy. They had a daily reminder that they were not safe, and they couldn't count on anybody to take care of them. The local dictator was not concerned about their needs, and they were hungry.

So hungry that they even longed for their old lives of slavery, considering the familiarity of chaos to somehow be more appealing than the unknown territory of the wilderness. So in the midst of their grumbling, the Lord says to Moses, "I'm going to bread rain down from heaven for you, and the people will go out each day and they will gather just enough for that day. Twilight there is going to be meat, in the form of quail that flies in, and on the mornings, there will be dew when lifted that reveals fine flakes. The Israelites saw it and said to each other, "What is it?" because they didn't know. I love that *manna* means *what is it*. Moses said, "This is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat for today." And each person in the household were to gather what they needed.

So in contrast to what they experienced in Egypt, here they found in the wilderness daily and consistent provision. They had lived so long in the society as slaves that the mindset still had a strong hold on them. They had not lived with daily provision, and instead with uncertainty and instability.

Stanley Hauerwas talks about the currency in Egypt in which you paid to get the things you needed through hoarding, through anxiety, through performance, through being a workhorse. The mindset of scarcity meant that if you had something, then it would take it away from me. There weren't enough resources to go around, so if you experienced something, had some kind of affection or respect or love then somehow I have less. This mindset meant then that everyone was a threat—that there was no way in which people could rest. Compassion, competition, danger lie behind leaders. And this mindset was so embedded in God's people that it didn't just affect their behavior—it affected their identity.

Now the wilderness gets a bad reputation as a place of desolation or darkness or punishment. But what if the wilderness is just the main place that we live? What if this is just the place in which we are shaped by God, to be a people that we already are, to figure out what it means—where Israel was shaped to be the people who could take the promised land? It's not about the mountaintop experiences, it's not about the crossing of the Reed Sea. The generation after that just had t-shirts that said, "My grandfather crossed the Reed Sea and all I got was this lousy t-shirt."

But that God would use basic human needs like thirst and hunger to provide an opportunity to shape and to build trust. That God uses these basic things and even though we want our faith to be predicated on these mountaintop experiences, God's invitation is for us to build up trust in our daily interactions and gathering each day what God provides. And with each step that Israel was taking and that we are taking, we are shedding this idea—these old thoughts that we have to perform in order to be loved, that we have to work and earn in order to be taken care of. In Egypt, if you want to eat, you're going to have to fight for it. If you want to live, you better perform, you better impress, you better lie, you better hide.

But in the wilderness, you eat because God provides every single day. The wilderness was the daily opportunity to establish a new way of living—a way that aligned with who Israel was—as the people who belonged to God.

Any kind of habit takes a lot of time to form. In fact, bad habits take longer to break, but the brain doesn't distinguish between good habits and bad habits, which can make ditching bad habits even more difficult. But self-help books and psychologists and scientists have varying understandings about how long it takes to build a habit or break an old one. So you'll hear somewhere around 45 days or 60 days or 90 days. Some say that habits can be established as quickly as seven days (maybe steroids are involved in that?). But one study showed it can take anywhere from 12 to 54 days to develop a habit.

So let's say the Israelites' year was somewhere between 355 and 385... They gathered manna every day except for the Sabbath, so that would be six days a week. So if they did that for 40 years, I think we're looking at over 12 thousand days—12, 280—which is a lot of opportunities to gather manna. Definitely enough time, according to neuroscientists for successful brain re-wiring. Malcolm Gladwell has the 10,000-hour rule, stating that if you want expertise in any skill is just a matter of practicing it for 10,000 hours or more. So, according to this rule, Israel could have written books on reliance on God's provision and picking up Frosted Flakes and how to make everything you could think out of it.

But God did not seek to form a people with good habits. God sought to form a people who trusted him. This wasn't about establishing proper protocol, making sure that you leave your tent and you take as much as you need. This was about looking God in the face as God was going to present himself. Trust, as it turns out does not have shortcuts. You can find a million different ways in which you can speed up your habit formation process, but with trust, it's not an issue of willpower or skill or strength. Trust is not a habit, and trust is not a feeling. Trust is a practice. Trust is the act of looking to God, even if it feels counter intuitive.

When Aaron and Moses are telling the Israelites what God has said he would do—that he would provide daily meat in the evenings and bread in the mornings---they look toward the wilderness, and the glory of God was there. Not just the words, but looking toward the wilderness, maybe the place where we would least expect God to be. Trust requires vulnerability; trust requires risk and relationship. And manna did rain from heaven as God promised, but the Israelites were the ones who had to go out and get it.

This isn't about the particular kind of provision. Maybe that's why it is called *What Is It*. It's about the Provider. *Manna---What Is It---*is because it didn't matter what it was. The point is that God showed up in the wilderness and took care of his people over and over and over. In a place that was considered unlivable, sustenance was given. In a place they never thought they could survive, Israel was fed every day. And maybe it was called *What Is It* because it was unlike any other provision they had ever seen.

God provides, and the question is not whether or not God will provide, but whether or not we will receive that provision. But we see this recursive story of God providing and sustaining and helping us thrive in places deemed unlivable. A place where we thought we wouldn't be able to make it or experience joy, and even in those lifeless spaces that God has led us in joy, his treasured possession, and provided every single day.

I wonder if the reason that we don't recognize and take this provision is that we expect it in a different way---it doesn't look like we thought the provision would look. Because there are those times when satisfaction in God does not feel like what we think it should feel like. Where being held by God doesn't feel like we want it to feel. Where we want things on our terms. And provision—or what we need—shows up in ways we do not expect or prefer. Or maybe we've been in such a bleak place that we stopped looking for provision altogether, and that's a tough space to be in.

Even when we don't see the provision, we are accompanied by the Provider. God is still near.

So when the Israelites when they found this manna, they looked at each other and said "What is it?" and Moses said, "This is God's bread, given for you." It will be here every single day that you are. If you are here, this provision will be here. If you are here, this presence will be here. If you are here, you will know the nearness of the God who delivers, the God who created, the God who rescues, and the God who continues to create. This is God's bread given for you, and there will always, always, always be enough for the Lord God provides.

Copyright by Christina Gibson, 2024