

Exodus 16:1-21

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/exod/exod-16/exodus-161-21/>

Verses 1 – 21 describe the Israelites' journey in the wilderness from Elim to Sinai and the conflict over a lack of food. As at Marah in the previous chapter, the people confronted Moses and Aaron concerning their basic need for food. In response, the LORD provided manna and gave explicit instructions on how to gather it, store it, and eat it. It was another incident that the LORD used to test His people about His ability to provide for all of their needs and increase their faith in Him.

This section can be outlined as follows:

- *The Grumbling (16:1 – 3)*
- *The Promise of Provision (16:4 – 12)*
- *The Provision of Manna and Quail (16:13 – 21)*

Verse 1 relates where the Israelites travelled to next. After the episode at Marah (15:22-27), *they set out from Elim, and all the congregation of the sons of Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai.* The “wilderness of Sin” was probably located in the southwestern part of the Sinai Peninsula, south of Elim. The word “Sin” is a place name related to Sinai and should not be taken to refer to anything of a moral nature, such as the rebellion of the Israelites that happened here. This part of the journey *occurred on the fifteenth day of the second month after their departure from the land of Egypt.* So, the Israelites left Elim exactly one month after they departed from Egypt ([Numbers 33:3](#)).

At some point in the journey, *the whole congregation of the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness.* The word “grumbled” is the same as in 15:24 and, as stated there, this is a word that implies rebellion against Moses and Aaron. Note that the “the whole congregation of the sons of Israel,” not just a few, were involved in this grumbling. Compare the “the people” in 15:24 to “the whole congregation” here. They did not just complain amongst themselves. Instead, *the sons of Israel said to them, “Would that we had died by the Lord’s hand in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat, when we ate bread to the full; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”* This is similar to their frightened reaction when seeing the pursuing

Egyptians in 14:10 – 12. But here, it is centered on food. They seem to be saying that they would rather be Egyptian slaves being worked to death and have food than to trust in the LORD to meet their needs in the wilderness. The complaint is completely unjustified in light of the fact that the Israelites left Egypt “with flocks and herds, a very large number of livestock.” ([Exodus 12:38](#)).

The LORD’s response to this latest complaint (vv. 2 – 3) is in verses 4 – 13. *The Lord said to Moses, “Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you.”* With the word “behold,” the LORD was trying to get the attention of His people about His gracious provision of “bread” that was going to happen very soon. The LORD then added a rule – *the people shall go out and gather a day’s portion every day.* The idea behind giving the people only a day’s ration of bread was that *He may test them, whether or not they will walk in My instruction.*

Through meeting their need, the LORD also tested them to see if they would be obedient to His *instruction*. *Instruction* here is a translation of the Hebrew word *torah*, which can also be translated “law.” Would they collect a day’s ration (thus obeying His word), or would they collect more and hoard it (a sign of not trusting Him)? This would make it clear what was in their hearts – obedience or a lack of faith. An exception was made to the daily provision of bread. The LORD commanded that *on the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather daily.* As will be seen starting in v. 22, this was to accommodate for the Sabbath.

Notice that the people are told to gather twice the daily amount on the sixth day without telling them why they are to do so. They would be told later (vv. 23).

The LORD’s words were then passed on to the Israelites. In the first statement (vv. 6 – 7), *Moses and Aaron said to all the sons of Israel, “At evening you will know that the Lord has brought you out of the land of Egypt;⁷ and in the morning you will see the glory of the Lord, for He hears your grumblings against the Lord.* That is, the evening provision was to provide yet another tangible sign that the LORD delivered them from Egypt and brought them into the wilderness, and the morning provision was a daily manifestation of the LORD’s glory (His sovereign power and greatness).

Moses adds a question for the people regarding he and Aaron, asking “*And what are we? Your grumblings are not against us but against the Lord.*” Moses demonstrates humility in recognizing before the people that

it was the mighty hand of God that brought the people out. God is their true leader. Therefore, when they grumble, they are grumbling against God. This is a good illustration why [Numbers 12:3](#) says Moses was the most humble man in all the earth.

In verse 8, *Moses said, "This will happen when the Lord gives you meat to eat in the evening, and bread to the full in the morning.* The words "this will happen" are not in the Hebrew. They have been added to make the translation more readable. The verse states that the LORD was going to meet their need twice a day – the "meat," which is quail ([Psalms 105:40](#)) in the evening and "bread" ("manna," v. 31) in the morning.

The provisions for food came about because *the Lord hears your grumbings which you grumble against Him. And what are we? Your grumbings are not against us but against the Lord.* Notice how the LORD is the center of attention in vv. 6 – 8. He was their deliverer, and now He was their provider, and He was the real target of their "grumbings," not Moses and Aaron.

In vv. 9 – 12, *Moses said to Aaron, "Say to all the congregation of the sons of Israel, 'Come near before the Lord, for He has heard your grumbings.'"* The word for "come near" is often used in the context of worship of and receiving instruction from the LORD. They were to draw near in spite of the fact that the LORD was aware of their grumbings.

Then an amazing thing happened. *It came about as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the sons of Israel, that they looked toward the wilderness, and behold, the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud.* As stated in v. 7, the cloud that represented the LORD's presence among His people appeared as it did in 13:21-22 as their Leader and in 14:19-20 as their Protector. This cloud will also be seen at Mount Sinai (19:9,16). For the LORD's glory to appear as Aaron was speaking gave the people another visual indication that Aaron was God's mouthpiece. His words were not his own but the words of God. Thus, to "grumble" against Aaron was to grumble against the LORD's words and the LORD Himself.

In verses 11 – 12, *the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "I have heard the grumbings of the sons of Israel; speak to them, saying, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread; and you shall know that I am the Lord your God.'"* In this section, the LORD stated that He has heard their "grumbings" (i.e. rebellion) of the Israelites and, though they are worthy of judgment for their unbelief, He graciously promised to provide for them both meat and bread. He promised to provide "meat" at the end of the

day and “bread” at the beginning of the day. In other words, it was a daily provision instead of once in a while or only they needed the provisions. The LORD seems to be teaching His people they were to depend upon Him to meet their needs every day. This is similar to what is in the Lord’s Prayer where it says, “Give us this day our daily bread” ([Matthew 6:11](#), [Luke 11:3](#)). Constant, daily dependence upon His gracious provision is what He wants from all of His covenant people.

In fulfillment of v. 12, *it came about at evening that the quails came up and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp.* The provision of meat was in the form of quails that apparently migrated from Arabia to the northwest in the spring and returned in the fall. That the quail came to the Israelite camp (no matter where it was) in the large numbers required to feed 2 million people was nothing short of miraculous. An interesting note is that the phrase “came up and covered” is used in the second plague to describe the extent of the infestation (8:6). Here, the phrase is used to describe a blessing; in 8:6, it is used to describe a judgment.

Also, in the morning, “dew” appeared in the camp, which is unusual in the dry wilderness. But this “dew” was different, because *when the layer of dew evaporated, behold, on the surface of the wilderness there was a fine flake-like thing, fine as the frost on the ground.* It was apparently very strange, as seen in the word for “flake-like thing” (Heb. *khaspas*) is used only here in the Old Testament. It was unlike anything they had seen, leading up to *when the sons of Israel saw it, they said to one another, “What is it?” For they did not know what it was.* The word for “what” here is the Hebrew *man*, which is not the normal word for “what” in the Old Testament.

To end their confusion, *Moses said to them, “It is the bread which the Lord has given you to eat.* The small flakes the Israelites found did not look like “bread.” The Hebrew word for “bread” (Heb. *lekhem*) could be used for more generic types of food other than what was normally considered bread. The manna was described in verse 31.

Verse 16 contains the LORD’s commands concerning how to gather the manna. First, the people are to *gather of it every man as much as he should eat.* That is, they *shall take an omer apiece according to the number of persons each of you has in his tent.* An “omer” is approximately 2 quarts or 2 liters. This amount was to be gathered for each person in a family.

Verses 17 – 18 contain another miracle in the manna story. In obedience to the word of the LORD, *the sons of Israel did so, and some gathered much and*

some little. Instead of collecting an omer as instructed, some gathered too little and others gathered too much. ¹⁸ *When they measured it with an omer, he who had gathered much had no excess, and he who had gathered little had no lack; every man gathered as much as he should eat.* This seems to be yet another miracle to ensure that all of the people had enough food to eat for the day. Those who collected too little manna still had enough, and those who collected too much (possibly because of greed) had their portion reduced.

But another act of disobedience occurred in verses 19 – 21. As if to remind them, *Moses said to them, “Let no man leave any of it until morning.”* Instead of listening to him and obeying, *they did not listen to Moses, and some left part of it until morning.* The people apparently thought that they had a better plan than the LORD, so they left some of the manna until morning.

Their plans were ruined because the leftover manna *bred worms and became foul.* The word for “became foul” was used to describe the odor resulting from the dead fish in the Nile and the dead frogs as a result of the plagues (7:18, 21; 8:14). So, any leftover manna would really stink if left overnight. And because they did not listen to him, *Moses was angry with them.* Interestingly, it does not say that God was angry. At this point in time God seems to be a very patient instructor to the people, as though He understands the difficulty in making the transition from being slaves to being free. So, *they gathered it morning by morning, every man as much as he should eat; but when the sun grew hot, it would melt.* Melted manna was useless as food and would eventually disappear. The melting not only would enforce upon them the daily routine of gathering the manna, but it would also allow the people to develop a sense of daily dependence upon the LORD to meet their needs.

Biblical Text:

¹ Then they set out from Elim, and all the congregation of the sons of Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after their departure from the land of Egypt. ² The whole congregation of the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. ³ The sons of Israel said to them, “Would that we had died by the Lord’s hand in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat, when we ate bread to the full; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”

⁴ Then the Lord said to Moses, “Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a day’s portion every day,

that I may test them, whether or not they will walk in My instruction. ⁵ On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather daily.” ⁶ So Moses and Aaron said to all the sons of Israel, “At evening you will know that the Lord has brought you out of the land of Egypt; ⁷ and in the morning you will see the glory of the Lord, for He hears your grumblings against the Lord; and what are we, that you grumble against us?”

⁸ Moses said, “*This will happen* when the Lord gives you meat to eat in the evening, and bread to the full in the morning; for the Lord hears your grumblings which you grumble against Him. And what are we? Your grumblings are not against us but against the Lord.”

⁹ Then Moses said to Aaron, “Say to all the congregation of the sons of Israel, ‘Come near before the Lord, for He has heard your grumblings.’” ¹⁰ It came about as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the sons of Israel, that they looked toward the wilderness, and behold, the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. ¹¹ And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ¹² “I have heard the grumblings of the sons of Israel; speak to them, saying, ‘At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread; and you shall know that I am the Lord your God.’”

¹³ So it came about at evening that the quails came up and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. ¹⁴ When the layer of dew evaporated, behold, on the surface of the wilderness there was a fine flake-like thing, fine as the frost on the ground. ¹⁵ When the sons of Israel saw *it*, they said to one another, “What is it?” For they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them, “It is the bread which the Lord has given you to eat. ¹⁶ This is what the Lord has commanded, ‘Gather of it every man as much as he should eat; you shall take an omer apiece according to the number of persons each of you has in his tent.’” ¹⁷ The sons of Israel did so, and *some* gathered much and *some* little. ¹⁸ When they measured it with an omer, he who had gathered much had no excess, and he who had gathered little had no lack; every man gathered as much as he should eat. ¹⁹ Moses said to them, “Let no man leave any of it until morning.” ²⁰ But they did not listen to Moses, and some left part of it until morning, and it bred worms and became foul; and Moses was angry with them. ²¹ They gathered it morning by morning, every man as much as he should eat; but when the sun grew hot, it would melt.

