Lesson: Exodus 16:1-15; Time of Action: 1445 B.C.; Place of Action: The Wilderness of Sin

Golden Text: “And when the children of Israel saw it, they said one to another, It is manna: for they wist not what it was. And Moses said unto them, This is the bread which the Lord hath given you to eat” (Exodus 16:15).

I. INTRODUCTION. Although God is usually the object of men’s murmuring, human leaders often receive the brunt of it. By murmuring against Moses and Aaron, the Israelites were rebelling against God. This week’s lesson provides an example of the immaturity that is often expressed by some believers. Uncertainty about things in our lives can cause us to murmur against God which is a sign of disobedience, which in itself grows from a lack of faith. This lesson will remind us that even in times of uncertainty, we must remain faithful to our God.

II. BACKGROUND FOR THE LESSON. After Israel’s Exodus from Egyptian bondage, being led by God in a pillar of fire by night and a cloud by day (see Exodus 13:21-22) they soon came to the Red Sea (see Exodus 13:18) where
they miraculously crossed it on dry ground (see Exodus 14:16, 22, 29) while the waters returned to drown all the host of Pharaoh (see Exodus 14:27-28). When the Israelites saw God’s great work they “feared the Lord, and believed the Lord, and His servant Moses” (see Exodus 14:31). Led by Moses, the Israelites sang a song of praise and gratitude to the Lord (see Exodus 15:1-21). However, this sign of gratitude and praise was soon replaced by grumbling revealing how superficial the people’s faith in God’s love was. Things started to get difficult as the Israelites journeyed from the Red Sea into the wilderness of Shur on the Sinai Peninsula. They traveled for three days but were unsuccessful in finding water (see Exodus 15:22). When they reached Marah, they found water, but it was bitter so they couldn’t drink it. As a result, the people murmured against Moses about having no water to drink and he cried out to the Lord, and once more God provided for His people by miraculously making the waters at Marah drinkable (see Exodus 15:24-25). They continued to journey down the western side of the Sinai Peninsula and came to a place called Elim where they found twelve wells of water and seventy palm trees, and they set up camp there by the waters (see Exodus 15:27). Our lesson begins with chapter 16.

III. ISRAEL’S MURMURING AND GOD’S RESPONSE (Exodus 16:1-5)

A. Israel’s complaint (Exodus 16:1-3).
1. (vs. 1). Our first verse says “And they took their journey from Elim, and all the congregation of the children of Israel came unto the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after their departing out of the land of Egypt.” We aren’t told how long the Israelites stayed in Elim, but at some point after replenishing their water from the twelve wells (see Exodus 15:27), “they took their journey from Elim, and all the congregation of the children of Israel came unto the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai.” The word “congregation” refers to an assembly or company. Here it refers to the entire community of God’s people. From “Elim” this large “congregation” of Hebrews continued “their journey” until they came to “the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai.” Although the word “Sin” is part of the name of this location, there is no reason to think that it has anything to do with sin as a violation of God’s command. “The wilderness of Sin,” often called the desert of Sin contained very little vegetation, and water was also scarce. It was an environment of stone and sand which made it a difficult place for travelers. But its barren surroundings made it the perfect place for God to test the faith of His people and also shape their character. The Israelites arrived in “the wilderness of Sin” on “the fifteenth day of the second month after their departing out of the land of Egypt.” On the night before the Israelites left Egypt (see Exodus 12:29-31, 42), God instituted the Passover Meal with Moses and told him that night would be a new beginning for His people and would become the first month on the Hebrew calendar (see Exodus 12:1-2). This first month is known as
Abib or Nisan (see Exodus 13:3-4; Deuteronomy 16:1; Esther 3:7). It covers parts of March and April on our Christian calendar. They arrived in “the wilderness of Sin” on the “fifteenth day of the second month” which was Iyyar or Zif (see I Kings 6:1) and covers parts of our April and May. This would have been about one month after leaving Egypt.

2. (vs. 2). This verse says “And the whole congregation of the children of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness...” When the Israelites arrived at the wilderness of Sin, “the whole congregation of the children of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness.” The term “murmured” has the idea of grumbling or complaining in anger against someone or something. It seems to imply that Moses and Aaron were the objects of verbal assaults from all “the children of Israel.” It is very hard to imagine this great multitude of people all murmuring or complaining to and about “Moses and Aaron in the wilderness.” Scripture indicates that murmuring is rebellion against God (see Numbers 14:2, 9), and is also a refusal to believe (see Numbers 14:11, 22-23). **Note:** The people should have known that Moses and Aaron were not responsible for their plight. Their complaint was actually against God. Christian leaders are called to do God’s work and therefore they enjoy a position of honor; however, they are not exempt from responsibility. When complaints arise, leaders should examine their own lives, practices, policies and behavior to see whether or not they have sinned. If everything is in order they can help the murmurers adjust their attitude towards God.
3. (vs. 3). This verse says “And the children of Israel said unto them, 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.” The sin of murmuring becomes more and more complicated because grounds must be found or made up upon which to base the murmurings. In other words, in order to make a person feel justified by complaining, they will often exaggerate their condition.

Notice what “the children of Israel said unto” 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.” They had actually convinced themselves that they had it better in Egypt as slaves than being free. Seriously? Everything we know about how the Hebrews were treated in Egypt reveals that they were lying when they claimed to have “sat by the flesh pots, and when we did eat bread to the full.” The term “flesh pots” means pots of meat. As slaves in Egypt, there are no grounds whatsoever to think that they had plenty of meat and bread as they claimed. Murmuring almost always leads to lies and falsehoods in an attempt to justify oneself. It appears that they had even convinced themselves that it was best for them to have “died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt” than for Moses and Aaron as they said to “have brought us forth into this wilderness, to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” In other words, they claimed that dying in Egypt as slaves where they had plenty to eat was better than dying in the “wilderness” of starvation (see Numbers 11:4-5). This is
truly insane! Their attitude was unbelievable when we consider that not too long before they had seen God perform a miracle that allowed them to cross the Red Sea on dry land while Pharaoh’s soldiers were destroyed (see Psalms 106:7-13). If that was not enough, God also turned the bitter waters of Marah into sweet water so that they could drink it (see Exodus 15:23-24). If God could do those things, could He not provide for them in the wilderness? To make matters worse, they blamed Moses and Aaron, God’s servants for their circumstances. The truth is that faith sees the hand of God in circumstances; but sight sees only fallible human leaders. Moses and Aaron had not delivered Israel from Egypt; it was the Lord who had freed them. This accusation against Moses and Aaron bordered on blasphemous unbelief. And they even added to their sin by using an oath taking God’s name in vain when they said “Would to God we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt.” They thought so little of their deliverance that they wished they “had died” in Egypt, by the hand of the Lord, that is, by some of the plagues which God brought on the Egyptians. If the truth be told, they knew they didn’t want to die in Egypt at the hands of the Lord, or any other way. If they did they wouldn’t have been crying out to Him to deliver them in the first place (see Exodus 2:23; 14:10). By using God’s name in a lie, they were using it in vain. **Note: It is never a good idea for God’s people to be filled with resentment, discontent and bitterness. It breeds hostility and leads to an unthankful spirit. Ultimately, those given over to murmuring will oppose God, His authority, and His leaders. The cause of murmuring and complaining is a lack of faith. Faith sees God; murmuring sees circumstances. Faith looks to the power of the**
Almighty; murmuring looks to the impossibility of the situation. The cure for murmuring is to take God at His word and wholeheartedly trust Him. Regardless of the situation, the believer must strive to maintain an attitude of faith. Rather than complain against God, we must accept His will for our lives without reservations. If God leads us to the desert, we must have faith that He will provide for us there.

B. God’s statement to Moses (Exodus 16:4-5).

1. (vs. 4). This verse says “Then said the Lord unto Moses, Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a certain rate every day, that I may prove them, whether they will walk in my law, or no.” The Israelites had murmured against Moses and Aaron and ultimately God Himself on more than one occasion. If we were in God’s place, one episode of murmuring most likely would have caused us to bring quick chastisement upon the whole nation. Israel deserved that, but God’s love, long-suffering and faithfulness (see Exodus 3:12) prohibited such a response from Him. God’s gracious nature was revealed in His response to the murmuring of the people when He said “said unto Moses, Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you.” The words “rain bread” here speaks of a plentiful supply of “bread.” Because of the people’s attitude, we might expect that God would rain “fire and brimstone,” but instead He promised to “rain bread.” It’s reassuring to know that even when we murmur against the Lord, He graciously meets our need, not because of our sin, but in
spite of it. Later, Jesus would refer to Himself as “bread from heaven” (see John 6:35, 38, 41, 43, 48-51). Jesus is God’s provision for man’s sin. Just as God provided for Israel’s physical needs through the giving of “bread,” He has provided for the need of all men through the death, burial, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Then God gave instructions to His people regarding the “bread” He would “rain from heaven.” He went on to say to Moses, “and the people shall go out and gather a certain rate every day.” By this, God meant that the people were to collect a sufficient day’s supply of this “bread” that He provided; so the Israelites had no reason to fear starvation. The Israelites called this “bread” manna, which means “what is it” (see verse 15). God said that the reason for these instructions was “that I may prove them.” The word “prove” means to test. God wanted to test His people to determine “whether they will walk in my law, or no.” In other words, questions about their faith and commitment to follow God’s will would be answered through the Lord’s testing of His people. Their response would show whether they intended to follow His instructions. Note: God wisely did not devise a plan to provide for all of the Israelites’ lifetime needs at once. He wanted His people to look to Him each day and trust Him for their daily needs for they were only to “gather a certain rate (or amount) every day.” God is not only concerned with meeting our needs, but also with building a relationship with His people. The proving or testing of God’s people was meant to give them an opportunity to show their love and loyalty to Him. It was not God’s desire to tempt them to sin but instead He wanted to strengthen their faith and
character (see James 1:13).

2. (vs. 5). This verse says “And it shall come to pass, that on the sixth day they shall prepare that which they bring in; and it shall be twice as much as they gather daily.” As noted in the previous verse, the Israelites were only to gather a certain amount of this “bread from heaven” each day for five days. Then here the Lord said, “And it shall come to pass, that on the sixth day they shall prepare that which they bring in.” This means that on “the sixth day” of the week, the people were to “prepare” the bread that they had gathered that day. Apparently preparing this bread included milling and baking the bread (see Numbers 11:8). The people were to make enough bread for two days. Then the Lord declared that what they collected on the sixth day “it shall be twice as much as they gather daily.” If they followed God’s instructions, God would double the amount of bread on “the sixth day” so they wouldn’t have to gather any on the seventh day, especially since the Lord wouldn’t send any bread on the seventh day (see Exodus 16:25). It would be a day of Sabbath rest (see Exodus 16:23). On the Sabbath, or that seventh day, the people were to rest, that is, cease from any work (see Exodus 16:30). However, the Sabbath Day observance would not be given until God gave the Law to Moses (see Exodus 20:8-10), but it is mentioned here most likely in anticipation of the coming of the Law. The Sabbath observance that was later part of the Law began at sundown on Friday and ended at sundown on Saturday. The Jews still observe the Sabbath Day this way.
IV. GOD’S MERCY AND MANIFESTATION (Exodus 16:6-12)

A. Moses’ declaration to Israel (Exodus 16:6-8).

1. (vs. 6). This verse says “And Moses and Aaron said unto all the children of Israel, At even, then ye shall know that the Lord hath brought you out from the land of Egypt...” The Israelites had earlier complained that Moses and Aaron were the ones who brought them out of Egypt when they said “Ye have brought us forth” (see Exodus 16:2-3). But here, “Moses and Aaron said unto all the children of Israel, At even, then ye shall know that the Lord hath brought you out from the land of Egypt.” Their murmuring had credited Moses and Aaron with their deliverance but Moses quickly told them that “at even” meaning “this evening,” God’s provision would reveal that He was the One who brought them out of Egypt, not His servants Moses and Aaron.

2. (vs. 7). This verse says “And in the morning, then ye shall see the glory of the Lord; for that he heareth your murmurings against the Lord: and what are we, that ye murmur against us?” Not only would God’s provision for Israel that evening prove that He brought them out of bondage, but God also said “And in the morning, then ye shall see the glory of the Lord.” The phrase “the glory of the Lord” can refer either to the cloud or Shekinah-glory that was leading the Israelites or to the
reality and splendor of God’s presence and character. In the
general sense, “the glory of the Lord” is the manifestation
of His divine attributes and perfections. Since, God’s
Shekinah-glory as revealed in the cloud is referred to in verse
10, here in this verse Moses uses the terms to indicate that
God would display His divine attributes and perfections to
Israel through His provisions. Moses told the people that
they would “see the glory of the Lord” because God
“heareth your murmurings against the Lord.” More
believers need to realize that any complaint against God’s
servants when they are carrying out His directions is
“murmuring against the Lord.” After Moses told the
people that God saw their “murmurings” as being against
Him, he asked the people a question: “and what are we,
that ye murmur against us?” This question stressed how
insignificance these two human agents, Moses and Aaron
were. They understood that they were nobodies used by God
for His glory (see I Corinthians 1:27-29). The Apostle Paul
expressed this same truth in II Corinthians when he said “We
have this treasure (the gospel message) in earthen vessels
(human bodies), that the excellency of the power may be of
God and not us” (see II Corinthians 4:7). Moses knew that by
themselves he and Aaron were nothing. They were simply
God’s representatives and their authority came from God.

**Note:** Whenever we take our eyes off the Master and
focus on people, we run the risk of murmuring. Every
complaint against our circumstances, every grumble
about the weather, about the way people treat us, about
our daily trials of life, is really against the One Who
“worketh all things after the counsel of His own will”
(see Ephesians 1:11).
3. (vs. 8). This verse says “And Moses said, This shall be, when the Lord shall give you in the evening flesh to eat, and in the morning bread to the full; for that the Lord heareth your murmurings which ye murmur against him: and what are we? your murmurings are not against us, but against the Lord.” In verses 6 & 7, Moses told the people that that evening and the next morning God would do something to remind His people that He brought them out of Egypt and also He would demonstrate His glory. Now Moses tells the people what God was going to do. He said, “This shall be, when the Lord shall give you in the evening flesh to eat, and in the morning bread to the full.” In other words, the people would know for sure that it is the Lord who will provide “flesh” or meat and all the “bread” they can eat until they were “full.” The Lord would provide for His murmuring people even in the midst of the wilderness, thus revealing His glory. The “flesh” refers to God’s provision of “quails” (see verse 13), and the “bread” refers to the “manna” (see verses 4-5, 14-15). The eye of faith sees the glory of the Lord in the “bread” and the “flesh” that He provides. What’s amazing here is the reason Moses gave the people for God providing for them. He said, “for that the Lord heareth your murmurings which ye murmur against him.” In other words, God was providing for them because He heard them “murmur against him.” This is amazing because God does what most of us, if not all of us would not do to someone who repeatedly murmured against us. He promised to provide meat and bread for them in the wilderness. How gracious is our God! And now Moses brings this whole thing home when he finally tells the
Israelites who they were complaining against. He said “and what are we? your murmurings are not against us, but against the Lord.” These complaining Hebrews were finally hit with the truth. Their “murmurings” were not against them “but against the Lord.”

B. Moses’ instructions to Aaron (Exodus 16:9-10).

1. (vs. 9). This verse says “And Moses spake unto Aaron, Say unto all the congregation of the children of Israel, Come near before the Lord: for he hath heard your murmurings.” In order to prepare the Israelites to see God’s glory (see verse 7) by providing for their needs, Moses called an assembly of the people. He commanded that “Aaron, Say unto all the congregation of the children of Israel, Come near before the Lord.” In response to Aaron’s call, the people were to assemble “near before the Lord.” This most likely means that the people were to assemble where the cloud was standing above them. It’s easy to imagine the fear that overcame God’s people when Aaron also told them the reason for this assembly. It was because “he (God) hath heard your murmurings.” I don’t know about anyone else, but I would’ve been scared to death!

2. (vs. 10). This verse says “And it came to pass, as Aaron spake unto the whole congregation of the children of Israel, that they looked toward the wilderness, and, behold, the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud.” Upon receiving the command to gather before the Lord, “the whole congregation of the children...
of Israel” assembled in obedience and “they looked toward the wilderness, and, behold, the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud.” Of course this was “the cloud” whereby God led the children of Israel in their wilderness wanderings (see Exodus 13:21-22). Evidently, the brightness of God’s glory shone forth in an extraordinary way. We don’t know for sure, but maybe God, who is light (see I John 1:5), revealed His essential nature through bursting light coming from “the cloud” and therefore revealing His majesty. This sign served as a reminder to these rebellious murmurers of God’s transcendent majesty.

C. God speaks to Moses (Exodus 16:11-12).

1. (vs. 11). This verse says “And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying...” With the whole congregation of Israel standing in the presence of God, undoubtedly from the cloud, the Lord spake unto Moses, saying...” We are told what God said to Moses in the next verse.

2. (vs. 12). This verse says “I have heard the murmurings of the children of Israel: speak unto them, saying, At even ye shall eat flesh, and in the morning ye shall be filled with bread; and ye shall know that I am the Lord your God.” Speaking from the cloud to Moses, God first said “I have heard the murmurings of the children of Israel.” As before when God said this, it means that he took notice of their complaints. Then the Lord repeated what Moses had said to the people earlier (see verse 8) saying “At even ye shall eat flesh, and in the morning ye shall be filled with bread.” God confirmed
His decision to provide for them instead of chastising them, which they deserved. God demonstrated both grace and mercy to His people. He showed them mercy when He didn’t give them what they deserved, chastisement; and He showed His grace to them when He gave them what they didn’t deserve, flesh and bread. He said He was going to provide for these rebellious people so that “ye shall know that I am the Lord your God.” When God provided them with quails and manna, the people would have no doubt that Jehovah was their God. They would also gain a fresh awareness of who God is. The words “your God” infers that they belonged to Him and He belonged to them. Therefore, He would take care of them, even in their mess! Note: God’s patience with people is designed to bring them to repentance (see II Peter 3:9). By patiently providing for the needs of Israel, God was giving them the opportunity to repent and place their faith in Him. The irony is that while Israel continually received God’s provision, we seldom read of them thanking God, praising Him, or seeking forgiveness. The Apostle Paul said it clearly when talking about sinful men, “when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful…” (see Romans 1:21). As God’s children, we can learn from Israel’s failure and be characterized by “giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father” (see Ephesians 5:20). When we are tempted to murmur, and we probably will, may we remember all of God’s benefits (see Psalms 103:2-7).
V. GOD’S PROVISION OF QUAIL AND MANNA (Exodus 15:13-15)

A. The quail and the manna provided (Exodus 16:13-14).

1. (vs. 13). This verse says “And it came to pass, that at even the quails came up, and covered the camp: and in the morning the dew lay round about the host.” God did not back down on His promise. That evening a flock of “quails came up” meaning that they flew in, and “covered the camp.” This provision of “quails” was truly a miracle of God. The “quails” mentioned here were small migratory game birds from the pheasant family. These birds were the “flesh” that God said He would provide for His people. They can be easily caught with hand nets after their exhausting flight during their migration. The vast number of birds and the timing of their arrival were a testimony to the Israelites that the supporting hand of the Lord was constantly present. In addition to the “quails” arriving “at even” (see verse 6) just as God had said, “in the morning the dew lay round about the host.” The word “host” here refers to the Israelite’s entire camp.

2. (vs. 14). This verse says “And when the dew that lay was gone up, behold, upon the face of the wilderness there lay a small round thing, as small as the hoar frost on the ground.” As the morning continued, we are told that the “dew” that laid on the ground around Israel’s camp, now “was gone up.” This means that “the dew” had evaporated. After “the dew” evaporated,
“behold, upon the face of the wilderness there lay a small round thing, as small as the hoar frost on the ground.” Once “the dew” was gone, the people saw lying all over “the ground” of “the wilderness...a small round thing.” The writer of Exodus described it here as being “as small as the hoar frost.” In other words once “the dew” had evaporated, there appeared on the ground fine thin white flakes like “frost.” God’s miraculous provision was unique to say the least. It was “a small” flake-like substance similar to coriander seed (see Exodus 16:31). This bread from heaven needed to be gathered in early morning because “when the sun waxed (or became) hot, it melted” (see Exodus 16:21). Note: Numbers 11:7 says that its appearance was like that of bdellium. In droplet form, bdellium is about the size of a pearl and is either yellow or white in color. This substance that the Israelites were to gather tasted like wafers of honey (see Exodus 16:31) or cakes baked with oil (see Numbers 11:8). It could be gathered and ground between two millstones or beaten with a mortar. It was possible to “seethe” or boil it in a pot and make flat cakes (see Exodus 16:23). Based on the fact that this flake-like substance tasted like honey wafers, it may have been possible to eat it raw.

B. The perplexity of the Israelites (Exodus 16:15). Our final verse says “And when the children of Israel saw it, they said one to another, It is manna: for they wist not what it was. And Moses said unto them, This is the bread which the Lord hath given you to eat.” Once the Israelites saw the flake-like substance covering the ground there in the wilderness of Sin, “they said one to another, It
is manna.” The people called this bread from God “manna” because “they wist not what it was” meaning they didn’t “wist” or know what it was. The phrase “It is manna” can also be translated as the question, “What is it?” Since the people didn’t know what to call this substance, Moses responded to them saying “This is the bread which the Lord hath given you to eat.” This was “the bread” that God had promised to rain down from heaven for His people (see verse 4). This bread from heaven continued for the Israelites during their forty year wanderings in the wilderness. But the Lord discontinued it after they entered the Promised Land and celebrated the Passover (see Joshua 5:10-13). **Note:** The children of Israel were worried about surviving in the wilderness, something that only God could do for them. This led them to murmur and complain forgetting what God had already done. The lesson for us is that we should not worry about the mundane concerns of the world. Before everything else, our thoughts should be focused on God’s kingdom and His righteousness. When this is true, we can rest assured that God will provide our needs (see Matthew 6:33). The truth is that eternal life is man’s ultimate greatest need. The manna the Israelites ate in the wilderness may have kept them alive for a time, but it did not rescue them from the eventual onslaught of death (see John 6:49). If a person wants to live eternally, he or she must partake of the Bread of Life (see John 6:47-48, 50), and we do so by placing our faith in Jesus Christ (see John 17:3; I John 2:24-25; I John 5:11, 20).
VI. Conclusion. The wandering Israelites murmured against their God-given leaders, Moses and Aaron. In complaining against Moses and Aaron, the people were really rebelling against God Himself. Murmuring and complaining against God’s appointed leaders is a sign of rebellion and a lack of faith. But God’s patient response to the murmurings of His people demonstrated His gracious nature. He reminded them of His majesty in the cloud, and also of His love and grace through His promise to supply the desired food. As believers, we must refrain from murmuring and instead thank God for His grace.