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## Grumbling - Exodus 15:22-27, 16:1-8, 17:1-4

Finally the Israelites have left Egypt. Soon they will be in the promised land. You would think they are happy now. But no, as soon as something seems to go wrong, they pick a fight with God and/or Moses. We have read three passages about grumbling. I make two general points and two specific ones:

1. In the Bible the narrator often does not comment on the stories he tells. Our stories in Exodus are an example of this. The Israelites present absolute nonsense, ingratitude and slander – but the narrator does not tell us that they are wrong. He simply reports their words. Unlike what happens in children’s Bibles, there is no raised finger, no comment.  
This way of writing is also used with regard to the violence in the OT. Much violence is reported, but it is not approved! We therefore cannot say: ‘It’s in the Bible so it’s good.’  
This makes our reading of the Bible a bit harder. We have to decide for ourselves if an action is good or bad. But we do have guidance: the Ten Commandments and the question ‘WWJD?’ ‘What would Jesus do?’
2. The Bible shows us Israel as a very self-critical nation. All the mistakes of their ancestors are recorded and preserved in the Bible. They know their weaknesses and they do not try to hide them. This is very different from the practices of e.g. the Assyrians; and think of the purged history books of Russia and China. Unlike Britain, Israel knows it is not always ‘world leading’.  
The Church should similarly be honest, self-critical, giving the glory to God. We make our mistakes but God still loves us.
3. Focussing now on 16:3, we see how the Israelites exaggerate and totally misrepresent the situation. They had been unhappy in Egypt, with the baby boys even being killed. No-one has planned that they will now die in the desert. They show that they have no trust in God. Yet their reaction is very human and understandable. They are disappointed and dashed hopes are bad for the soul. It is natural to forget our past trouble and to think that our present trouble is the worst ever. E.g. the holiday we miss this year is the worst possible disaster. We think the present pandemic is the worst event in history. After the unification of Germany in 1990, the East Germans were very unhappy and many still are, because of unfulfilled (unrealistic) expectations. How do we respond to our disappointments? It is okay to lament, to tell God we feel bad. Many psalms are laments. But we need to respect Him: false accusations are not acceptable. Are you in a desert? Keep your eyes on God/ Jesus! Do speak to him in lament but do not stop trusting his love and goodness.
4. Israel needed to learn to trust God, and the same is true for us. (But we should not trust in illusions and dreams, only trust Him for His actual promises.) In Exodus 15:25 and 16:4, we see that God is testing his people. With regard to the manna, they are only allowed to gather so much, and on the sixth day a double portion because there will be none on the sabbath. ‘Gather exactly what the Lord tells you to’ is a test which many fail.  
For them and for us, having our faith tested is a great opportunity for growth. Let us listen carefully to what God tells us to do and not to do.  
The Israelites could be certain: because God had already delivered them, he would surely bring them to the promised land. We can likewise be certain: because God has already saved us in Jesus Christ, he will surely be faithful to us – in Jesus! (Romans 8)

*You can find comments on these passages in Deuteronomy 8:1-5, Psalm 78:17-31, 40-43, Psalm 106:13-15, John 6:30-51 and 1 Corinthians 10.*