

“What Is It?”— Exodus 16:13-15

The text for this sermon, the theme of which is, “What Is It?”, is Exodus 16:13-15 → *In the evening quail came up and covered the camp, and in the morning dew lay around the camp. And when the dew had gone up, there was on the face of the wilderness a fine, flake-like thing, fine as frost on the ground. When the people 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 that the LORD has given you to eat.”* This is the text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus:

Have you ever opened a package, taken out the gift and looked at it with confusion, trying to figure what it was? To avoid embarrassment you think fast and respond: “Oh! Thank you very much! It’s wonderful!” Inside you’re hoping you won’t have to ask the next question: “Tell me about your gift.” You do all you can to withhold what you’re really thinking: “Uh . . . what is it?”

How many times do people receive a gift from God in their lives and look at it with confusion, try to figure out what it is? The gift may come “packaged” in a wonderful blessing which makes them stand in awe of God’s presence, deliverance and power. It may come

“packaged” in simple, everyday substances of life which many take for granted as they enjoy and use it. It may come “packaged” in trial and suffering which is a catalyst for some to turn away from God in unbelief and others to turn toward God in faith. No matter how it is “packaged” God is constantly at work gifting people, not simply for your physical benefit but also for your eternal well being.

In our text we hear about God gifting His people, the Israelites, while on their journey to the Promised Land. As always, God’s gifts flow from His love as acts of grace toward us undeserving sinners. We encounter God’s people grumbling *against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness* because of their growling stomachs. They said in Exodus 16:3 → *Would that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.*

In light of what the LORD was doing through their deliverance from Egypt such grumbling revealed the seriousness of their sin. Not only were they grumbling against Yahweh but they doubted His physical providence in their lives and actually rejected His deliverance and salvation in their longing for the old life of slavery in Egypt. In the midst of the challenges to your faith sin shows its ugly face as the devil gets a foothold, tempting you to long for your old way of life in

sin. Before you know it, you can scorn God's gifts, grace and salvation in the midst of grumbling and complaining. This is not just taking God's gifts for granted. Rather, **it is unfaithfulness to the Giver of these gifts.**

2 Timothy 2:13 reminds us: *If we are faithless, God remains faithful—for He cannot deny Himself.* Thus, our text records Yahweh's faithfulness as He continued providing for such undeserving ingrates and sinners. He provided them food—meat in the form of quail and a *fine, flake-like thing, fine as frost on the ground* delivered with the dew. No, it wasn't frosted flakes. *When the people of Israel saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was* (verses 14-15). Thus, they called it "manna." "Manna" is the Hebrew word meaning, "What is it?" (cf. Exodus 16:31) They received the gift from Yahweh and said, "What is it?" Moses described it as *the bread that the LORD had given them to eat.*

This gift was another expression of God's grace and, aside from satisfying their hunger, He gave them this providence for some very specific reasons:

- ① It was a reminder that He, Yahweh, was their God. It served a very basic confession of their faith which we confess when we pray, "Give us this day our daily bread." The catechism's meaning to this petition states that "God certainly gives daily bread to everyone

without our prayer, even to all evil people, but we pray in this petition that **God would lead us to realize this and to receive our daily bread with thanksgiving.**” (Luther, Martin. Luther’s Small

Catechism with Explanation. © 2017 Concordia Publishing House: St. Louis, MO. p. 21)

Realizing this truth is crucial to an attitude of gratitude. Forty years later the Israelites would hear Moses telling them in Deuteronomy 8:17-18 → *Beware lest you say in your heart, “My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.” You shall remember the LORD your God, for it is He Who gives you power to get wealth, that He may confirm His covenant that He swore to your fathers, as it is this day.* Receiving our physical blessings from Yahweh with thanksgiving instead of grumbling and complaining is a constant confession of faith in Him as our God and that He takes care of us no matter what the situation looks like in our lives—no matter how the gift is “packaged.”

- ② Providing for His people in this manner also served as a test of their faith. Moses reminded the people about to receive the gift of God’s faithfulness by entering the Promised Land what else He was doing while providing this manna. The LORD humbled them, testing them to know what was in their heart, whether or not they would keep His commandments (cf. Deuteronomy 8:2). This was

evident in the specific instructions which accompanied their gathering of this manna. They were to gather the exact portion needed for their family each day and none was to be kept overnight. On the sixth day they were to gather a double portion so that they didn't have to gather on the seventh day, the day of rest.

(cf. Exodus 16:16-25)

However, as happens so much of the time the people failed the test, failing to simply obey the LORD's instruction by faith. Some kept the manna for the next day and *it bred worms and stank* (cf. Exodus 6:20), with the exception of the portion kept overnight for the seventh day (cf. Exodus 16:24). However, some still disobeyed Yahweh's command and went out looking for manna on the Sabbath day only to be disappointed and chastised by Moses. It's an example of how our sinful natures want to do things our own way in the midst of the LORD's clear teaching and instruction while receiving His gifts of grace.

- ③ Thus, providing for the peoples' needs in this manner also served the purpose of teaching them the importance of obedience based upon a simple trust in God's Word, whether or not they understood what it was or why it was to be done that way. Moses said in Deuteronomy 8:3 → *He humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers*

*know, **that He might make you know** that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. **Not only does God provide to sustain our lives, He also provides so that He can teach us how to live by faith in Him and His Word daily.***

The “packaging” of God’s gifts, the giving of God’s gifts and the receiving of God’s gifts must all happen **on His terms**. This is especially true as the LORD fulfilled the promise of His deliverance of all people from their slavery to sin, death and the devil in the Person & Work of Jesus, the Christ. During His public earthly ministry many people looked at Jesus saying, “What is it?” or rather, “Who is He?” While teaching the Jewish leaders that He was the Savior of the world and their need to place their faith in Him for eternal life, they asked Him in John 6:30-31 → *What sign do You do, that we may see and believe You? What work do You perform? Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, “He gave them bread from heaven to eat.”* Referring to receiving the manna as a sign of the validity of Moses’ ministry they wondered what sign Jesus could give to prove the validity of His ministry. In effect, they were looking at Jesus saying: “Who are You?” just like the people in the wilderness looked at the manna and said: “What is it?”

Using their point of reference as a springboard, Jesus referred to

Himself as the Bread of Life. It is only by trusting in Him that your true hunger—the hunger for relief of your guilty conscience in sin . . . the thirst for true contentment and purpose in your life . . . the hunger for a right relationship with God—will truly be filled. And how did these people react to His claims? According to John 6:41, *the Jews grumbled about Him, because He said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.”* They reacted with “Who is He?” in unbelief. In the midst of trying to figure out Who Jesus was based upon their own experiences and their own ideas, they took offense at Him. They could not receive the gift of forgiveness of their sins “packaged” in Jesus.

Yet, even in the midst of such rejection, Jesus was faithful to God’s plan and purpose for you. While grumbling about Him in unbelief, Jesus still died on the cross as the ultimate displayed God’s fantastic grace and the gift of forgiveness of your sins. He took the sins of us grumbling sinners upon Himself on the cross. He did that so that we could live in His joy, His peace and His contentment in our daily lives.

These characteristics are displayed in your life only as gifts of His Holy Spirit. They are also gifts to others so that they see Christ’s joy, peace and contentment at work in your life and ask “What is it?” “What is it that causes you to be at peace in the midst of so much

chaos, troubles, problems and insanity in our world?” “What is it that brings forth your compassion for sinners, thankfulness in all circumstances and love for the unlovable?” What is it? It is the complete and total forgiveness of your sins in the Bread of Life, Jesus.

Do you find yourself grumbling when things don't go your way? Do you find yourself discontent as God continues to provide for you by His grace daily? Look to the cross of Jesus and instead of saying “What is it?” confess your sins saying, “Thank You, Jesus! It's all for me!” Then you will be sustained by His forgiveness, uplifted by the Bread of Life, Jesus Himself, through the written Word of God and His sacraments. You will no longer encounter Jesus in that written Word of God saying, “Who are you?” for you know exactly Who He is! He's your Savior and Lord! Amen.

*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly,
teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom,
singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs,
with thankfulness in your hearts to God.
And whatever you do, in word or deed,
do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus,
giving thanks to God the Father through Him.*

(Colossians 3:16-17)

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