



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

Studies in Exodus: Daily bread

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12 October 2014

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15

2 In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. **3** The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the LORD's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death." **4** Then the LORD said to Moses, "I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions.

9 Then Moses told Aaron, "Say to the entire Israelite community, 'Come before the LORD, for he has heard your grumbling.'" **10** While Aaron was speaking to the whole Israelite community, they looked toward the desert, and there was the glory of the LORD appearing in the cloud. **11** The LORD said to Moses, **12** "I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites. Tell them, 'At twilight you will eat meat, and in the morning you will be filled with bread. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God.'" **13** That evening quail came and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. **14** When the dew was gone, thin flakes like frost on the ground appeared on the desert floor. **15** When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread the LORD has given you to eat.

At the current time, one of the greatest health challenges facing the world is the control of the Ebola virus, as an epidemic is devastating parts of Africa – and its impact in Texas was huge as well as in Spain and now here in Australia. I listened to a recent report from the region most affected, which referred to people being not merely advised but clearly instructed to avoid any kind of physical contact with each other in any public place.

This advice comes very hard to a people who are used to far more intimacy with strangers than we would ever countenance and this compounds suffering, which is already on an unimaginable scale, with personal restrictions for the whole community that are hard to live with.

A crisis situation can change the way people react one to the other and totally transform a positive community into something less than good.

One biblical commentator from Africa wrote, "The Ngambaye people of Chad have a saying that 'one day of hunger can make a wife leave her husband's house.' The point being made is that:

- Suffering alters people's perceptions
- Suffering changes people's behaviour
- Ignoring people's situation can lead to disaster

The descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are released from oppressive treatment, but the discomforts they now experience in the wilderness render Egypt to be luxurious by comparison.

We must not miss this point because it underpins the whole narrative and helps us to understand with greater clarity what happens in people's experience.

In the hardship of the wilderness, the people complained to Moses and Aaron. They protested about the lack of food and in their minds they have the plentiful fare they enjoyed in Egypt. Stephen Dray, in his commentary, noted, "Egyptian slaves were generally well looked after." Their complaint was articulated as such, "*There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.*" (Exodus 16:3)

There is a real sense that the people were now experiencing something far more than low food supplies. It was an anticipation of what might become a famine.

I use this passage to open up some of the issues which still speak to us today. Chapters 15 to 18 of Exodus describe events which took place in the wilderness between the time when the children of Israel left Egypt and their arrival at Mount Sinai. We hear these words as Christians and we know something of the ultimate outcome for these people, but we must stay long enough in the passage to be able to understand what is happening to them and why they had to learn some of these lessons, hard as they were.

Göran Larsson, who has written extensively on matters that enable Jews and Christians to relate to each other, authored a marvellous book entitled *Bound For Freedom*. He explores the way the exodus has a pivotal place in both Jewish and Christian traditions and suggests these particular chapters can be defined by the title he gives to one of his sections—'Stumbling Steps Toward Freedom'.

There is the old saying "It is easier to take Israel out of Egypt than it is to take Egypt out of Israel."

It will take these people generations to learn the truth that "one does not live by bread alone" (Deut.8:3). And we still need to learn that lesson today.

Let us look somewhat more closely at this passage.

RETROSPECT RENDERS MANY EXPERIENCES AS LESS ONEROUS – v.3

Retrospect can be helpful, but it often exaggerates the pain of the present. Conversely, times of testing and temptation, including the near certainty of death, can eventually be seen as a gift. It is interesting that the prophets in Hosea (2:16-20; 11:1; and 13:4) and Jeremiah (2:1-3) regard this difficult journey as a time of singular blessing. One writer called it "a veritable honeymoon".

These people's lives will never be the same again. Scotland recently held a referendum on their relationship to the United Kingdom. The result in one sense was decisive, but it is equally true that the political landscape will never be the same again.

The hardship of life in the wilderness arouses nostalgia for life in Egypt. In my preparation, I was struck by some words by a writer who concluded, "The house of bondage is depicted as a luxurious holiday place."

We can well understand that in Egypt the Hebrews at least had food, water and lodging. In the desert, these benefits seemed to outweigh the disadvantages of slavery. Now they are free, but they have disadvantage of a different kind and it is hard to come to terms with.

People are almost instinctively inclined or persuaded to forget the troubles of the past when they face the real experience of the present. However, what we must understand is that the complaint of these people is actually against God.

The verb 'to complain' means something like 'to grumble' or more precisely 'to express resentment'. The verb is used five times in this chapter, three times explicitly complaining against God.

Slave mentality still gripped the Israelites. John MacKay said, "They just wanted others to provide for them and tell them what to do." Their description of Egypt makes no mention of the slavery which had been the price of their Egyptian security. "They forgot about the cruel oppression from which they suffered, and so reveal how little they valued the freedom the Lord had provided for them."

They grumbled, and this is far more than mere negativity, for they attributed the worst of motives to their leaders. "...*but you (both Moses and Aaron) have brought us to this desert to starve the entire assembly to death.*"

Moses was well aware of the conditions of the wilderness and it took a man of faith and great leadership to be willing to take responsibility for people on such a journey.

Erwin Lutzer wrote a booklet called *Failure: the Back Door to Success*. He tells of a man who was losing his memory and went to his doctor for advice. He received this diagnosis from his doctor, "We cannot help your memory without impairing your eyesight. Now the choice is yours, would you rather be able to see or to remember?" The man thoughtfully replied, "Frankly, I'd rather have my eyesight than my memory. You see, I'd rather see where I am going than remember where I've been."

GOD RESPONDS TO GRUMBLING WITH COMPASSION – v.v.9, 11 and 12

One positive aspect of their grumbling would seem to lie in the fact that they saw every experience of life as providing an insight into their relationship to God. However, these people only have a limited knowledge of the kind of love that God wants to offer to them.

Buffeted by the hardships of the wilderness, the Israelites waxed nostalgic about the fleshpots and the abundance of bread in Egypt. It was out of this experience that God heard their complaint, but it is important to acknowledge that he has compassion for his people.

Anyone who works with people will readily grasp some of the important lessons of this passage. To a pastor visiting congregational members in difficult moments, there can be the experience of hearing how good the past was, but there is also the huge pastoral lesson of how God meets people in the midst of their pain, hearing the cries and offering comfort and hope. Together the pastor and people can anticipate the continuing comfort and compassion in the benevolent care of his people.

Moses may well have felt angry and frustrated. Perhaps he would have preferred that the people learned swiftly how to handle the lack of food and their difficult environment, rather than complaining continually. However, in the scarcity of the desert, God responds to his people in their time of need.

They must have been at a point where they expected to die, and their only hope seemed to be to return to Egypt, to the way of former things, but God will help to move them on, as he lavishes his provision as an indicator of his compassion.

In Numbers, we read how God was not pleased at the people's grumbling (Numbers 11:1, 10 and 14:11-12), but here in Exodus we are able to see that he knew their grumbling was part of their development. They were still in the early days of learning what God was teaching them.

I have always found it easier, through God's grace, to handle people who make mistakes and are aware of their own shortcomings, than those whose motives were something other than good. We can do this through God's grace because this is what God is like. He understands us in our weakness. He is compassionate and this will be a characteristic of all meaningful and growing discipleship, as well as effective leadership.

As a young preacher, I was fortunate to meet the late Alan Redpath who was teaching at Capernwray Hall at the time. He wrote a very readable study on the Book of Nehemiah and developed the thought that a leader must have compassion. He wrote about Nehemiah, "You never lighten the load until first you have felt the pressure in your own soul. You are never used of God to bring blessing until God has opened your eyes and made you see things as they are."

Moses and Aaron had to learn this lesson, but did so at the hand of God who demonstrated his compassion, even in the face of grumbling. If God can ... then so can we!

Jewish commentaries on this particular passage draw attention to the way God tests his people by giving them the manna. We have only a limited time here, but we would find it helpful to note that the manna was not given unconditionally. It could not be kept until the following day and so there is a test of obedience.

Larsson again is helpful. "God's commandments, however, always penetrate more profoundly than outward observance alone. Therefore it is not the literal obedience of the people alone that was tested through the manna. Concurrently they were taught three lessons, respectively, dealing with (1) temperance in one's own life, (2) solidarity with one's neighbour, and above all else (3) confidence in the Lord."

Others will not be interested in how much we know until they know how much we care. The response of God's compassionate love clears the way for the people to trust both God and those leading them through the wilderness.

Compassion is far more than a foray into kindly deeds. We ask ourselves if we have really understood it. This will mean far more than recognising tears which, hard as it is to say, can be performed to order. Jess Moody described compassion in asking the question, "Did you ever take a real trip down inside the broken heart of a friend? To feel the sob of the soul – the raw, red crucible of emotional agony? To have this become almost as much yours as that of your soul-crushed neighbour? Then, to sit down with him or her – and silently weep? This is the beginning of compassion."

God's compassion is not that he changes the circumstances of our lives, but changes the attitudes by which we may face those circumstances.

GOD PROVIDES FOR HIS PEOPLE – v.v.13-16

When we examine the text before us, we note how Moses instructs Aaron to assemble the people “to draw near to the Lord”. This in itself is a liturgical insight which would indicate an encounter with God in the sanctuary.

Just as we saw in the Red Sea crossing, it is God who provides for his people. God is Lord of both the natural and the supernatural and these two are found in these passages. A writer helpfully articulated about God, “He designed the laws of nature and uses them to provide for his people.” Once we have drawn the same conclusion, we can understand that bread from Woolworths or Coles is as much a gift of heaven as any other.

In understanding scripture in this way, we draw back from the kind of demythologising which marks out much Old Testament reflection and see it as a way of setting out on a task of “re-sacralising the things of earth”.

The Hebrew word for ‘bread’ can be a generic term for food in general, but in these verses it is more specific.

Rein Bos makes a helpful comment, “The place of shortage, threat and death is redescribed, rearranged, and even re-created by the Lord to a place of abundance, promise, and life. The place that was thought to be a place of death, thirst and enemies can become the locus of the glory of the Lord; the wilderness turns out to be more brilliant than Egypt.”

With the dispersal of the morning dew, the manna was discovered all around. The Israelites were told to collect “an omer” for each person in their tent. This was just enough for the day in hand. It would not last another day. It reminds me of my first trip to France and having bread at breakfast time that was so fresh that it melted in the mouth. But it really only lasted that day. It didn’t have a ‘sell by’ date, for there was only one day to eat it.

We are told that on the sixth day, which preceded the Sabbath, they were to take enough for two days, which would unusually last for that time. This is not only an important emphasis for a day of sacred rest, but also an assurance that God gives us exactly what we need and no more. Joshua 5:12 reminds us that for forty years the Israelites were to eat manna until they reached Canaan.

On a recent visit to the cinema, I saw the film *Still Life*. It is a touching portrait of a man who worked for 22 years for a local council, making arrangements for people who died alone in the local authority area.

He worked in an increasingly brutal world where he sought to provide a service for those who die alone, retaining dignity and proper solemnity. It is a film that confronts the issue of death, but points to something far deeper – the way John May, the lead character, expresses compassion and concern is attractive and compelling. God’s dealings with his people in the context of the wilderness express the greatest of all compassion for individuals and the community.

In this biblical narrative, we note an irritating propensity that the people had to grumble—and yet it is transformed by the compassion of God who provides at their very point of need.

Not long ago, a group of children in a Christian school in third or fourth grade was asked to complete the following sentence: “By faith I know that God is”

Brandon, one young boy, wrote, "A provider, because he dropped manna for Moses and the people, and he gave my Dad a job." Perhaps the little boy gives us great insight into the nature of God's provision for our lives.