

No Longer Slaves: the gift of manna

In this study we travel further into the wilderness with the Israelites. They have learned that YHWH is great in a crisis of war (Egypt: vanquished!), and that he is able to heal not only those live faithfully before him but the very well they drink from (the bitter spring of Mara: healed!). The lessons of faith continue as the prospect of long travels looms. Israel has grain and animals, but not an endless supply. Looking ahead they worry over what will happen when they run out. Their situation is one of food insecurity, and it terrifies them.

Food insecurity is a scourge in our day, with many countries in trouble against a backdrop of global inequity. Begin by praying for a country where food security is absent. Syria, Haiti, Yemen, Madagascar to name a few; Gaza near catastrophe in this and other respects. (In global indices, New Zealand ranks 14th equal, alongside Denmark.)

1. What country's plight moves you most, and why?
2. How does this affect your attitude and practice towards food and other resources you hold?

Now read Exodus 16:1-3 and 6-9. The Israelites - not for the first or last time - complain against their leaders. This is a misfire: as Moses and Aaron point out, they're not the ones to complain to; their role is limited and they can hardly solve the problem. A good complaint is addressed to the right authority, and waits for an answer. So - in the graciousness of the Lord - the Israelites' complaint has come to him, where it belongs.

3. Who do you complain to when faced with disappointment or frustration? And what do you hope to achieve through your complaint?
4. Do you take complaints to the Lord? If not, why not? If yes, do you wait for an answer?

Consider the nature of Israel's complaint in v.3. For all that they were slaves in Egypt, they at least knew they would be fed. Note how the need they presently feel as acute colours their memory of the past in outrageously rosy shades; you might recognize the tendency. This is muddle-headed nostalgia of the worst kind.

5. Do you "rose-tint" the past - or the situation of others ("the grass is greener!") - when under stress? Why?

For all Israel's misdirection and poor framing, God really does hear the complaints of his people (how gracious is our God?!), and answers their need for a stable, reliable supply of food. Read Exodus 16:12-15. You will have protein, and you will have carbs. The quail drop is a miracle, to be sure, not in the fact of quails in the wilderness (this is a known phenomenon, from time to time), but in their sheer number. The greater miracle, though, and the real answer to prayer, is the gift of manna. It's a classic gift of God's design: a substance of mysterious nature ("man-hu" means "what is it?" - a name they kept for it ever after, see Exodus 16:32-34), which turns out to be good to eat. The Israelites never really understand it, but it works, so long as they handle it per the instructions. Good counsel for discipleship. Who *really* understands prayer? Or the Bible? Or the church? Yet these things nourish us, and we trust them as gifts of a good God, learning how they work in our lives.

6. What aspect of God's provision in your life, or of his instructions for living, mystifies you?
7. How important is it to you to "figure out" what God is doing, or the sense of what he's asking, before you can trust and obey?

For manna to be a gift to the Israelites, they have to work with it in the way God instructs. They can't just do what they like, as they soon learn. Read Exodus 16:16-28. The manna you collect will be just enough for one day - not more, not less. You won't get tomorrow's supply today, unless it's the day before the Sabbath.

8. Remember that the Israelites' basic issue is *security*. What is the Lord setting out to teach Israel about security through these regulations?

Jesus doubles down on the lesson of manna in his own teaching. In the Lord's prayer we pray, "give us this day our bread for the day" (Luke 11:3); we don't ask for tomorrow's bread today or for a daily feast. And the discipline of trusting God each day *for* each day greatly helps us in our issues around security. As the Lord argues (Matthew 6:27, 34), worrying about the future won't add an hour to your life; keep your horizons short. This day's challenges: grace for this day. Grace for each day, collected early (Exodus 16:21 - the manna melted in the sun if uncollected).

9. What challenges your sense of security as you look to the future?
10. What would it mean to shorten your horizons to today?
11. How and when do you collect your "daily bread" from the Lord each day?

Finally, consider how God's provision of manna honours and enforces the Sabbath. Read Exodus 16:4-5 and 23-30.

12. Why is the Sabbath so important to Israel's sense of security in the Lord?
13. What might it mean for you to "rest on the seventh day"?

Finish in a time of prayer, confessing your trust in the Lord who provides, and asking - alone or with others - for each one's "daily bread".