

Exodus 16:1-21 & 16:31-17:7

Bread of Heaven

Christ Church Liverpool

Main Point: God's ungrateful Church see only negatives, but God gives them life at ultimate cost to himself.

Main Application: You are a person who rationalizes God's provision and forgets his goodness. He should judge you; but instead he feeds himself to you. Repent and rejoice!

Sinful people grumble:

What sort of person are you?

- Glass half-empty – focus on the empty space?
- Glass half-full – focus on how much is left?



I'm violently undecided – depending on the situation I am wildly enthusiastic or totally disillusioned!

But when it comes to God I think we are all, by nature, a's. When it

comes to God we are all glass half-empty people.

That was certainly the case with the Israelites whose story we have been following over the last few weeks.

No more than 5 weeks before the events we are looking at this morning the people of Israel were spared terrible death when God judged the land of Egypt. God provided each Israelite family with a lamb, the Passover lamb, which they could sacrifice to avert his judgment.

Next, as the Israelites fled the country, God spectacularly rescued them from the pursuing Egyptian army, by bringing them on a miraculous dry path through the sea, and drowning the soldiers who were chasing them down to try and return them to slavery.

Then God led them to a place where he created fresh water from a bitter spring and, just before the point where we pick up the story, to a wonderful oasis of lakes and trees.

God did all of these things in fulfilment of promises he had made he would, using the leadership of Moses and Aaron, bring the people of Israel out of slavery, through the desert, to a promised land of blessing; a land flowing with milk and honey.

You would think, wouldn't you, that these people would have every reason to be positive about the work of the

Lord in their lives? You would think that, with all that stuff having happened within the last month the men and women of Israel would be pretty optimistic about what God was going to do for them?

But they aren't. Just a few days after setting out from the oasis at Elim, where, no doubt, they had gathered as much food as there was available, they are unhappy.

Now in any group of people – your office, your ward, your school or our church – there are always a few "Eeyores" – the people for whom everything is always wrong. But we're not just talking about a few naysayers here – again and again the writer of Exodus goes out of his way to emphasise that "the whole Israelite community", "the people" were grumbling.

This isn't just the "glass half-empty" kind of people. When it comes to God everybody is this group – these people who have seen the Lord do amazing and astonishing things for them – is a "glass half-empty" person.

The more you look at these verses the more astonishing their complaints are. To start with they seem to have an incredibly rose tinted view of what it was like to have been in Egypt. "We sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full," they say. Well there's no evidence that the people of Israel were starving in Egypt, but it doesn't seem likely to me that a nation which was trying to reduce the numbers of slaves by killing the baby boys was going to go out of its way to make sure they had fillet steak for dinner night after night!

Even if they did have enough to eat what was the food for? To give them energy to work. And what work were they doing? Erecting fortification so that their oppressors would be better equipped to fight them and, quite possibly, erecting palaces and monuments for the Pharaoh's who were trying to destroy their families!

Perhaps even worse than their hopelessly unrealistic remembrance of Egypt is the way they treat Moses and Aaron, the two men who have taken their lives in their hands again and again to go and represent the people before Pharaoh and who led them through the sea from slavery to safety.

They don't just suggest that Moses and Aaron made the wrong decision. They actually accuse them of having a bad motivation – "you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death." Not only is it difficult to think of any possible reason **why** Moses and Aaron would want to do such a thing, but there is absolutely no evidence that Moses and his brother have

ever had anything other than the interests of the people at heart. Yet the instinct of the Israelites is to condemn their leaders as callous, hard-hearted, cruel men. As we will see, by the time we get to the end of this section and the events at Meribah the Israelites have even less excuse for their terrible behaviour.

Fair enough, you might think, but didn't I say at the beginning that we are ALL like this when it comes to God? It's easy to see how that assertion can be justified for the Israelites from this story. But how about us? What's the evidence that we are like that? Sadly you don't have to look very far to find it. Because we aren't just glass half-empty people with God; we are like that with everyone.

You don't believe me? Well let me give you a little test. Imagine that you walked in here this morning and two people spoke to you. One person says something kind and nice and complementary. The other said something unkind. Which comment will you remember for the rest of the day?

Pastor Tim Keller reckons that our bias towards negativity, our glass half-empty attitude, means that it takes 100 compliments to cancel out the effect of 1 insult. I don't think he's much out there.

So it's no surprise that we are like that with God. When it comes to God it's in our nature to be just the same; to be just like the Israelites. I'd be prepared to bet that more people in Britain have sworn at God when they lost their job than praised him when they got their job. If you are anything like me there will have been plenty of times in your life when you'll have got cross with God for taking away something, or someone, that you never thanked him for giving in the first place.

Sometimes even our complaints against other people are really complaints about God – just like the grumbling of the Israelites was. 16:8 "Who are we," Moses says, "You are not grumbling against us, but against the Lord."

The way we speak about other people, about life, about whatever is happening to us, can be a thinly disguised rejection of God. A way of expressing that we do not believe he has given us the life we ought to have; the life we think we need and deserve. Sinful people grumble.

In a way that's not particularly remarkable. It's sad, but, given that the whole Bible story is a story of people who are in a relationship with our creator which is not one of thankfulness, adoration and gratitude but one of ingratitude, rebellion and thanklessness, I guess it's not totally surprising.

What is striking is how God responds to their grumbling. In each of the two episodes we are looking at this morning there are two surprising elements in God's response. One of them is easy to see in each story, the other one is hidden a little bit deeper beneath the surface. The surprising thing that's easy to see is that instead of responding to the Israelite rebellion with the judgment they deserve God gives them the thing they need but do not deserve. The surprising thing that's harder to spot, but immensely important, is that there is a huge cost to God in doing that.

1 God gives himself so we can have bread to live (16:1-36)

When Moses heard God's first words after the complaints about the lack of food and the dreams of pots of bread and stew in Egypt he must have been quite intimidated. Do you see what the Lord says: "I will rain down..." So far in this story God has rained down locusts, flies, gnats and hail. He has rained down a whole sea on the heads of the Egyptian army. It sounds like a picture of judgment. But God is going to rain down bread. Not only that but he is also going to give them meat – in the form of a huge flock of tasty quails.

Just as they imagine that they sat in Egypt and ate "all the food we wanted," so, v8, they will genuinely have meat and bread "to the full" from the Lord. The quail, it seems, were not such a regular feature as the manna. It seems they arrived from time to time throughout the years that the Israelites spent wandering in the wilderness. It was the bread that was the focus of this promise. The manna kept on coming, according to v35, day after day, six days a week, for 40 years, until the people of Israel reached the promised land and were able to grow crops of their own.

The bread was ideal for them. It was ideal because there was plenty of it for everybody. They were told to gather an omer, which seems to have been a unit of volume rather than a unit of weight, per person. It's probably about the equivalent of a normal sized loaf of bread. Most people would have been in extended households with children – so some would eat more than an omer, some less, but that would have been the right amount for a family.

If you look at v18 it might seem to suggest there is some sort of additional miracle going on here – that no matter how much or how little they gathered then, hey presto, when they measured it their manna all came to the same amount. Our translation doesn't quite capture the sense of it. A clearer way of putting it might be: "*Because they gathered it by the omer the one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little.*" Because, after everybody had gathered up what they could find, they

shared it out so that everybody had an omer they all had the right amount.

It was also ideal because it was really nice bread! It was definitely a bit unusual. In v14 we learn that the miracle bread was left behind when the dew evaporated from the ground and that it came was "thin flakes like frost." I always think of it as looking a bit like corn flakes, but that might be totally wide of the mark! Whatever it looked like it wasn't anything familiar to them – it was so weird that their name for it was "manna," which translates into English as "what is it?" So perhaps they looked like white Wotsits rather than corn flakes!

But the most important thing we are told about this food is what it tasted like. That's a pretty essential thing to know about a food! It tasted "like wafers made with honey." To us wafers might mean the cones you get ice-cream in when they're too cheap to give you a biscuit cone, or, even worse, communion wafers! But these are like wafers made with honey. This bread is sweet. That was a big deal for them. Until really quite recently – the 18th century – there was no large scale growing of sugar. So if something that wasn't a fruit tasted sweet it almost certainly had honey added. Since, at this time, bee-keeping wasn't really doable, the only honey you could get was from wild hives. That meant that honey was really precious and expensive; it was the food of the rich. God was giving them rich man's food! God's bread wasn't Tesco value medium white sliced. God's bread was Quarter Café deli focaccia with rosemary and olives.

For the Israelites though the honey had even more significance than the fact that it was a luxury food. Because this food was being provided to them on their way to a land God had promised. A land that God had described to them as "flowing with milk and honey." Every time they ate this bread, this miracle bread that God had graciously provided despite their complaining, the very taste of it was designed to remind them of God's faithfulness to his promises.

That was a lesson they needed to learn. Because the third ideal feature of this bread for the Israelites was that the way it was given was designed to "test" them. Not a test God wanted them to fail so he could give them a C-. A test God wanted them to experience so they could learn to trust him.

The bread would come every day, except Saturday, and it wouldn't keep, except on Friday night. So they had to trust God in two ways. They had to trust him to keep providing the bread every day, and they had to trust him to keep the bread fresh for Saturday.

God gave them ideal bread. It was the right amount, it was delicious, it's taste reminded them that God keeps

his promises, and the way it came taught them that they needed to trust him.

God didn't just give them bread when they deserved death. He gave them the ideal bread for life.

But what about that second element I mentioned? The bit that's harder to spot? Because there doesn't appear to be any real cost to God in giving them this bread does there? There he is, sitting up in heaven, sprinkling some Frosties about most days and taking a day off on Saturday? How does that cost him?

Well to see that we have to take a quick peek at how Jesus Christ understood the significance of the manna. You will probably know that Jesus, in what must surely rank as one of his most famous miracles, turned just 5 loaves and a couple of small fish into a meal for 5,000 people.

What you may not know is that after he had done that amazing sign Jesus spend a long time explaining its significance to a group of people who recognized in that miracle a reenactment of what Moses had done in the desert. "What will you do for us?" they asked Jesus. "Our forefathers ate the manna in the desert." The answer Jesus gave them is both shocking and wonderful.

The first, the shocking, thing Jesus said to them was that although the bread God provided in the desert was wonderful in every way it didn't really solve the Israelites' problem. They wanted bread from God so they wouldn't die. God gave them bread, and they died anyway. Not immediately – but just a few decades later all these people were dead. Just like every human being before and after them. As amazing and wonderful as it was this manna, this miracle bread, didn't really solve their fundamental problem.

The second, the wonderful, thing Jesus said to those who looked to him as a kind of new Moses, was that the real purpose of the manna was to point people to him. "I am the bread of life," he said. "If anyone eats of this bread he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."

The manna did not solve the fundamental human problem that, however good your diet, you will die. Jesus did solve that problem. Through his death, through offering his flesh as a sacrifice, Jesus brings life forever, life beyond death, life through death, to anyone in the world.

It's remarkable enough that God should meet human rebellion by giving life rather than death. But how much more astonishing is it that he should be willing to pay a great price for us to have such life? God gives himself, so we can have bread to live. Not only that but also...

2 God judges himself so we can have water to live (17:1-7).

You might think that by the time the people set out from the Sinai desert and camp at Rephidim they would have learned their lesson. After all a couple of hours before they went to Moses to complain about the water supply they would have been out round their tents picking up the manna that God had, once again, miraculously provided! But, just like us, the hundreds of pieces of evidence of God's care, kindness and goodness to us that surround us every day were quickly forgotten when they had a grievance.

This time the complaint is more serious – we are told that they “quarrel” with Moses. That's a word that can be used for a formal legal accusation – they are “litigating” against Moses. That was certainly what Moses thought; he says to the Lord in v4 that they are ready to “stone” him. The people of Israel have found Moses guilty and passed sentence on him.

Well when the people saw what Moses did next they ought to have been absolutely terrified. Moses is to summon the people – like in a formal court hearing. He is to appear before them with the elders of the nation; presumably the ones who are making the complaint on behalf of the people. Moses is to carry the staff.

Do you remember what this staff was used for? It was used to bring plagues on the Egyptians. It was used to turn the Nile into blood, to bring gnats and flies and hail and boils and locusts and darkness. When Moses pointed the staff of God it brought the walls of water crashing down and destroyed the most elite soldiers of the most powerful army in the world. The staff of God is not just a symbol of authority; it is a rod of judgment. So who is going to be judged?

Well it's not Moses; he's carrying the rod. It must be the people of Israel. God told them that if they did not obey him he would bring on them the judgments he brought on the Egyptians. Now God is keeping his terrible promise. But Moses passes by the people just as the Lord back in chapter 12 passed over their homes to spare them judgment. Instead he strikes... the rock. Can you imagine the relief on those Israelite faces? Instead of the judgment that Moses has made it quite clear they deserve they have not only escaped judgment but, miraculously, been provided with water from the most unlikely source imaginable; the top of a big rock. It's like getting water out of a stone.

Once again in this passage the surprising thing that's easy to see is that instead of responding to the Israelite rebellion with the judgment they deserve God gives them the thing they need but do not deserve.

But again there is another surprising thing that is slightly harder to spot but massively important. Because, once again, there is a huge cost to God in doing this. What happens to the judgment that should have come on the people of Israel? Where does it go? Well it goes into the rock, doesn't it? Who is standing there? God is standing there. The Hebrew word is “al” – upon. God stands upon the rock that is judged. God, to use C S Lewis' famous phrase, is in the dock.

Now maybe you think that's fanciful. Over interpretation. That we're finding something in the text that simply isn't there. Well I don't think so. Remember where we are; this is the mountain of God. Remember what Moses does – he strikes the rock with a rod; the phrase is all about violent judgment. In the Bible striking something with a rod indicates punishment.

It's only when we come to the New Testament though that we can be absolutely sure that this is what was happening there at Mount Horeb. God was, truly, indicating that he would judge himself for the wrong of his people. Here is what the apostle Paul says about the people of Israel at this time. He says that: “they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.” The rock that was struck with the staff of judgment; the rock that split apart to allow life-giving water for the people of Israel; Paul is quite clear that that rock was the Lord.

Who gets the blame when things don't work out in your life? Well, because we are, by nature, all glass half-empty people when it comes to how we view others, our instinct is that other people should get the blame – just like the Israelites blame Moses and Aaron.

This week a bishop has been in the news for making offensive remarks about the Royal family and, especially, the prospects for William and Kate having a long and happy marriage. Peter Broadbent has been asked to “withdraw from public life” – which seems to be ‘Bishopspeak’ for gardening leave. As a result of the controversy he apologised. But it's worth noting that his apology, like most public apologies these days, wasn't so much admitting that what he said was wrong but that he regretted “the distress caused” and apologized, not for that he said but for “the hurt caused” by them.

Do you see what that kind of apology does (and it's not just Bishop Pete – we all do it)? It pushes the blame back onto the other person. If we don't admit that what we said was fundamentally wrong and say we're sorry the other person is upset we are basically saying that it's their fault for being hypersensitive aren't we?

In millions of situations across the world this morning people are finding someone else to blame – their wife, their kids, their parents, their boss, their government –

for their own failures. Most of all, when it comes to the most fundamental problems of life people blame God.

Our glass half-empty view of God isn't just pessimism – it's sin. God ought to judge the people of the world. He has given us gifts of reason, language, communication and technology that mean everybody on the planet could have all we need to live; but we squander his gifts resulting in poverty, disease, war and environmental disaster. Then, despite the signs of God's goodness and grace throughout our world, just like the Israelites, ask "Is the Lord among us or not?"

God ought to judge us. If we want to live in a world of justice there is no hope for us. People often ask me why God doesn't give us what we deserve. I always answer that I am profoundly grateful that God doesn't give me what I deserve; because I deserve death and judgment and hell. God ought to judge us. But, instead he submits to judgment himself. Instead of making us stand before him, the perfect, loving, gracious God comes and stands before us and takes the rod that we deserve.

A little further on in the Old Testament that Exodus there is an intriguing verse in a passage which is about the perfect Divine King who God will send to rule his people. The passage says that this Christ, the God-Man will be the son of God. But it also says that "When he does wrong, I will punish him with the rods of men." As far as I can work out there is only one person who claimed to be God's king in the Bible who was ever struck with a rod. King Jesus, of whom it is said "again and again they struck him on the head with a staff." But he never did wrong. He was being struck not in judgment of his own sin, but of the sins of others.

Here, then, is the fulfilment of Exodus 17. God takes the rod that we deserve in the person of his own son, the Lord Jesus Christ. He was beaten, cut, executed and, most of all, separated from his eternal Father, to take the rap for us. Jesus has been struck for anyone, for everyone, who puts their hope in him. Not just to pay for one error but for all our sin, for all our self-centred suspicion and rejection of God and other people. God has judged himself, so we can have water to live. Water that Jesus himself describes as a "spring of water welling up to eternal life."

It is amazing that God didn't punish the Israelites for their grumbling and quarrelling. It's amazing that he doesn't instantly judge us for our self-obsessed, negative and rebellious way of thinking about him. But it is all the more amazing when you understand that for him to do that didn't just mean overlooking our sin. It didn't just mean letting bygones be bygones. It meant giving himself and judging himself so that he could be just and we could have life.

So what difference will any of this make to us this week? Well I can't speak for you. But for me, at least, the implications are pretty clear. Because I know that I am by nature much more prone to question God's goodness when something I think is bad happens that I am to praise him when something I think is good happens. And I know by nature I am inclined to think that God is a bit like a multi-millionaire giving his view on the recession; what he has to say might be interesting but it clearly doesn't really make any difference to him.

This passage profoundly challenges both those things in my life. Next time we say grace before meals it must not be a religious habit disguising a mind that really believes I have provided this food by my own hard work. Next time we are in a difficult situation at work we must look back at God's provision in the past, look forward to his promises for the future and not assume he has abandoned us because we don't understand what God is doing right now.

Most of all, perhaps, we need to remember that instead of judging us as we deserve God has graciously given himself to us and judged himself for us so that the eternal future for all who come to Jesus in faith, for all who, eat the bread and drink the water that he offers, is no longer death but life. Life that begins now and last, through death, into forever.

And the more we remember the undeserved grace God has shown us and the infinite amount it cost him, the less inclined you and I will be to have a glass half-empty view of God.

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