

Prayer

Dear Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. We ask You to empower us to do great acts of power and love within this needy world. Not so that we can become puffed up with pride at our achievements, but so that Your Kingdom may come in our midst, and the Gospel heard by people who need its liberty and power to save. Break new ground in evangelism amongst us, we pray! AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Look at the objects you have placed around where you sit or work. Use them as a starting point to praise God for His graciousness to you.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the homeless.** *We are not always aware of the extent of the problem homelessness, so pray for people in your neighbourhood who have no permanent home.*
- *Give thanks for the quality of life you have been given*
- *Pray for nations of the world where there is unrest just now*

Meditation

The things of God are immeasurable and inestimable:

His love is more precious to us than any gift we can receive;
His support is more steadfast than the foundations of a tower;
His grace is more awesome than any experience we may have;
His faithfulness is more consistent than the seasons of the earth;
His promises are more assured than any due processes of law;
His future is more certain than the science of an atomic clock;
His healing is more complete than the circle of the globe;
His salvation is more secure than the safest of homes;

And if we have problems, then it is us who must change.

Bible passage - Exodus 16:1-12

¹ The entire Israelite community set out from Elim and came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after their departure from Egypt. ² In the desert, the whole community of the Israelites continued to complain against Moses and Aaron. ³ They said to them; 'If only we had died by the Lord's hand in the land of Egypt, where we sat around our meat stew pots and had all the food we could want, but you have brought us out into the desert to make the whole community die of hunger!'

⁴ So the LORD said to Moses, 'Look, I am going to rain down bread from heaven for you. Each day, the people must go out and gather a portion which is sufficient for that day. I will test them in this way to see whether or not they will follow my instructions. ⁵ On the sixth day when they prepare to gather, it will be twice as much as on other days.'

⁶ Moses and Aaron then said to all the Israelites, 'In the evening you will know that it was the LORD who brought you out of Egypt; ⁷ and in the morning you will see the glory of the Lord in response to your complaining against Him. And who are we that you complain against us?' ⁸ Moses went on to say, 'When the LORD gives you meat to eat in the evening and all the bread you could want in the morning in response to your complaining against Him, what is that to do with us? Your complaint is not against us but against the LORD!'

⁹ Then Moses said to Aaron 'Say to the entire congregation of Israel, "Draw near to the LORD so that he may hear your complaining."' ¹⁰ When Aaron announced this to the whole Israelites community, they turned towards the desert, and right there, the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud! ¹¹ At that moment the LORD spoke to Moses, ¹² 'I have heard the complaining of the Israelites. Say to them, "In the evening twilight you will eat meat, and in the morning you will have plenty of bread. You will then come to know that I am the LORD your God."' "

Bible Study

Review

In the Lord's prayer, we pray 'give us this day our daily bread'. In this way, we ask the Lord to provide for us physically and spiritually. We all need the Lord's help to eat and remain alive, and also to 'feed' our faith so that we grow as God's people. Now, it is just possible that when Jesus said this, he had in mind God's provision of bread to Israel whilst they travelled through the wilderness from Egypt to the Promised Land. The Israelites certainly needed bread and other food to eat on their journey, but they also needed to learn to approach God themselves with their needs, and it was an important lesson.

In reading through our passage we can spot that it contains several repeats. 'Complaining' against the Lord is mentioned seven times, and the opening three verses explain why, for the people had finished the food they brought from Egypt, and needed more! As hinted at in yesterday's reading (15:24), the Israelites were unable to trust God despite His great miracle of deliverance and salvation, which they had just experienced. For them the difficulties of desert life made them look back with longing to the stability of their past life in Egypt (16:3). They complained, and typically of people in difficulty, their first response was to blame their leaders, Moses and Aaron (16:2,3)!

The reply to the people's complaint may appear rather complicated, but straightforward enough once we have unravelled the text. The whole passage is series of repeats, which emphasise what God will do to provide meat in the evening and bread in the morning. Firstly, the Lord tells Moses that bread will '*rain down from heaven*' (16:4) each day. Secondly, Moses tells the Israelites that their complaints will be met '*in the evening*' and '*in the morning*' (16:6,7), and he then repeats this, adding that the Israelites will receive meat in the evening and bread in the morning (16:8). Thirdly, Moses and Aaron encouraged the people to come close to the Lord to hear this same message from the Lord Himself (16:9), who addressed the Israelites and told them that they would receive meat '*in the evening twilight*', and plenty of bread '*in the morning*' (16:12).

Clearly, Moses and Aaron sought to deal with the people's angst by bringing them to the Lord. So when the people began to complain, they obtained the Lord's response (16:3,4), but made it very clear to the Israelites that they were not the ones who were responsible for what was happening. They were the Lord's agents, and they were attempting to help the people of Israel, not hinder them. If the people were honest, then they should bring their complaint to God (16:8), so they gradually drew the people towards the Lord and His presence (16:9). It is only when they came into the Lord's presence and stopped complaining against their leaders that the people finally heard God promise that he would provide for them. All in all, it was quite clear that God's provision was promised, but the real issue was trust. The people had to learn to trust God and trust His leaders.

This whole story shows the lack of faith within Israel, and the moral of the story is therefore more complex than the simple message 'the Lord will provide' given to people in need. It is a warning that if God's people have a problem, they should not just complain to their leaders, they should go to God themselves. Moses and Aaron had a duty to lead God's people, but they were not to be used as a substitute for God Himself!

In this light, Jesus' prayer (the Lord's Prayer) is rightly a prayer of request going straight to God the Father. All God's people should go firstly to Him with their needs, and no one else. The source of all nourishment, whether physical or spiritual is God Himself, and those who are lacking should not complain about the world, the church or the competency of leaders. They should first go to God and see what He has to say. Both this passage and the Lord's prayer make this same point.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- The people's original complaint
- A dispute?
- An appearance of the Lord?

Going Deeper

When the Israelites left Egypt and began wandering in the desert, they did not have any sense of God's personal love for them, and they directed their feelings about God to Moses and Aaron. As we explore the text further, we will see how important it was that Moses and Aaron challenge the people to accept the reality of God's caring presence in their midst. As long as they attempted to keep God at a distance it would be hard for them to receive His blessings!

The people's original complaint

In the first verse of the text we discover that a month has passed since the people left Egypt (on the day after the Passover, which was the evening of the fourteenth day of the first month – 12:6, 12:18). It is not certain where the time passed, because the only other time reference is the three days spent travelling from the Red Sea to Marah (15:22f.) One month was certainly enough time for the people to become fed up with eating unleavened bread cakes made from the dough they took with them from Egypt. If the Israelites were typical of nomadic people of the time, they would have been reluctant to kill and eat the sheep and goats of their flocks because they represented their wealth and provided essentials for survival such as wool and milk. It is easy to see how the people began to grumble and complain against God.

As before, the people directed their complaints to Moses and Aaron, but they added a personal twist to the complaint; 'you have brought us out into the desert to make the whole community die of hunger!' (16:1) There is more than a hint here of an angry crowd making the issue personal, so Moses and Aaron may well have sensed danger, and all they were attempting to do was the Lord's will! Nevertheless, they brought the matter to the Lord, who immediately promised to 'rain down bread', and added a twist which picks up the theme of testing which we found in yesterday's story about the events at Marah.

The test given by the Lord was all about the Sabbath. Although the people had not yet been given formal instructions about this in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:8-11), it was a principle they had observed from ancient times (see Genesis 2:1-3) and would naturally have refrained from work on the Sabbath. The Lord's test was therefore as follows; when the people gathered the bread on the day before the Sabbath, they would have to gather in faith, in order to provide enough for their needs on two days (16:5). The test would be to see whether the people accepted the Lord's special provision for two days, or whether they would be tempted to try and gather on the Sabbath day! We will have to see what happens in the rest of chapter 16 to find out what happened, but in the meantime, things were not going well in the Israelite camp.

A dispute?

There certainly seems to have been a fair amount of tension between Moses and Aaron and the Israelites when the two of them reported the Lord's words back to the camp. As Moses told the people what the Lord had said, he began by delivering his own message 'In the evening you will know that it was the Lord who brought you out of Egypt' (16:6), adding, '... who are we that you complain against us?' (16:7). Moses seems to have been more concerned to teach the Israelites about their God, because they appeared to be hiding from Him by dealing only with Moses and Aaron, and consequently blaming them when they thought things were going wrong rather than looking to the Lord. This was not good, because it was only during the previous incident at Marah that they had been challenged to 'listen to the Lord' and pay attention to Him.

Moses appears almost angry that the people were not paying attention to the Lord and addressing their concerns to Him. His comments in verse 8 are translated differently in the various translations, but it is clear that in the Hebrew, Moses told the people that the Lord would act to give them food, 'and what', he said, 'is that to do with us?' (16:8) This was a sharp comment, and indicates the heat of the conversations taking place.

An appearance of the Lord

Following this tense moment, Moses strangely stops addressing the people themselves, as if fed up with speaking to the recalcitrant people, and told his brother Aaron to tell the Israelites to approach the Lord with their complaining (16:9 – you may find that other translations do not make this very clear). Then, as he spoke and delivered the message, the text of Scripture says 'they turned towards the desert' as if turning away from Moses and Aaron in anger. Suddenly, the Lord appeared in the cloud in front of the Israelites as they turned from Moses! It was a dramatic moment of confrontation in which the people were faced with the presence and glory of the Lord (16:10) Himself! In this way, Moses was vindicated and the people were brought face to face with the reality of the Lord's presence and power.

Lastly, after the whole incident had died down, Moses was able to deliver the complete promise of God about how the people's needs would be met (16:12); they would have meat in the evening and bread in the morning, though the form of that food and how it would arrive was still a mystery. It was a promise of God which the people would have to trust Him for and wait.

It is significant that the very last words of this passage are spoken by Moses 'You will then come to know that I am the Lord your God.' This confirms our understanding of the passage, which is that it is all about Moses' challenge to the people to accept that he and Aaron were simply God's messengers and intermediaries. The people needed to come before the Lord their God and acknowledge His role in leading them out of Egypt and go to Him to provide for their needs. Eventually they would need to come and worship Him for themselves (see Exodus 19); something they had not done throughout the story of the Exodus even though they had been obedient to Him on the night of their escape from Egypt.

Application

If you began this reading by thinking that it was all about feeding the Israelites in the desert, then you will know by now that the focus of the passage lies elsewhere, in the three way relationship between Israel, God and the two leaders. Tomorrow, we will read the story of what actually happened when the Lord fed the people of Israel in the desert.

How often do we treat our leaders like gods rather than the servants they are meant to be, and fail to relate to the Lord in the way He wants? This is an important message from our text, and it reminds us that our primary relationship is with the God who has saved us, not the human institution of the church or any of its leaders. This is easy to say, but hard to practice, for churches and leaders are all very real to us, and people readily exercise their religious beliefs in a way which is dependent upon particular churches or Christian leaders. Look, for example, at the way that Christians become highly dependent upon their particular denomination or style of church; or the way that some people follow particular preachers, worship with certain worship leaders or read only certain authors. Many Christians read far more novels from the local Christian bookshop than the Bible!

The truth is that the Lord is our God and Jesus is our Saviour. The glory of this fact is bigger than individual churches or denominations, ministers, speakers, authors or musicians. Just like Moses and the people of Israel in the desert, a good leader is one who will turn us around to see the presence and the glory of the Lord, and go to Him to meet our needs, not to them. Then, when we say the prayer 'give us this day our daily bread' it will be a genuine prayer to a Saviour who we know personally and whom we trust to meet all our needs.

Discipleship

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss whether you think that the general theory underlying the study is correct, or is there any other way of explaining this text?
2. In what ways are Moses and Aaron model leaders for the people of God, and what qualities do they demonstrate in this story?
3. What do God's people complain to Him about most often today, and why?

Topics covered by this text

- *The provision of God*
- *The promise of 'manna' in the wilderness*
- *Physical and spiritual food*

Personal comments by author

Each of us will admire some Christian leader, organisation or institution; and that is natural. It is important, however, to make sure that in our estimation we do not allow them to become more important than God; for He has given rise to leaders, peoples and structures; and He has saved us. Christian disciples must accept the Lord as their highest authority and it is impossible to do this unless each of us knows how the Lord speaks to us. If we do not know how God speaks to us, then we will not be able to identify the characteristic of His voice; moreover it will be hard to distinguish it from other preachers, teachers or worship leaders etc. These issues need our constant scrutiny and discernment.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *In what ways does the Lord provide for you. Make a list of these things and see how large it can grow! Use this list as a source of prayer in coming days, and be blessed to know that your Lord loves you through this provision.*
 - *Pray that God will continue to provide for the people on this planet. When we look at the sheer numbers of people who exist, it is hard to imagine how God can handle them all individually, but He does. Talk to Him about this and seek His mercy and His provision.*
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Final Prayer

Your voice, Lord God, is like the whisper of a loved one, the call of a song-bird sounding its distinct call, the song of an ancient psalm sung to beautiful music, and a thousand other beautiful sounds. Give us discerning ears, which can hear You amidst all the sounds of life, and respond to Your love: AMEN
