

FREE AT LAST

Exodus 15, 16

Today we return to the book of Exodus and the story of Moses. After his long battle with Pharaoh the people are finally free. They have escaped from slavery. The LORD has miraculously parted the sea to let them through on dry land and then brought the waters back to engulf their enemies. The sounds of suffering have been replaced by the sound of singing. Now it's all systems go, full steam ahead, Promised land, here we come.

Chapter 15 verse 22 gives us more than a hint of what is to follow. 'Then Moses led Israel from the Red Sea and they went into the Desert of Shur.' They went into *the desert*. It goes on, 'For three days they travelled in *the desert* without finding water.' Are you getting the picture? In the desert – no water. Finally, they did find water but as they rushed to slake their thirst they discovered to their horror that it was undrinkable. Verse 24: 'So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "What are we to drink?"'

It was a salutary lesson for Moses. He discovered that looking after more than two million people was going to be just as tough as facing up to Pharaoh king of Egypt. Moses cried out to the LORD and the LORD met the need. Verse 27 says, 'Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs and seventy palm trees, and they camped there near the water.'

Soon it was time to move on. Chapter 16 verse 1. 'The whole Israelite community set out from Elim and came to *the Desert* of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai.' Having left one desert they now found themselves in another one.

It's worth pointing out that this is not an allegory. It's not talking about Elim, the denomination down the road. Because the desert was called the desert of Sin it doesn't mean there was anything wrong in going there. These are just place names. But the point is that it was a desert. It was a further test of their faith in the LORD.

In verse 2 we begin to be aware of a noise, a noise that becomes very familiar as we read the story of the journey to the promised land. 'In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron.' It was back there in the last chapter, verse 24. 'So the people grumbled against Moses.' We find it again in the very next chapter and verse 3. 'They grumbled against Moses.' It's a sad and rather depressing accompaniment to the story, the constant drone of dissatisfaction and complaint. And it wasn't just a few. It was everyone! I did a little word search on chapter 15 verse 22 to chapter 17 verse 7. There are nine references to grumbling in just these three chapters.

The exact details of the complaint are in verse 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."'

The heart of the problem was a real one. They were in the desert and they needed food. But the way they expressed themselves is very revealing.

We can see several trends. They lapsed into *fatalism*. 'If only we had died by the LORD's hand in Egypt!' They recognised the LORD but in a way that represented him as callous and uncaring. If they had died in Egypt it would have been the will of God. It was more fatalism than faith. They were taking no account of the wonderful salvation that God had provided.

Secondly, we see evidence here of *consumerism*. 'There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted.' Their abiding memory of Egypt was of stuffing

themselves with as much food as they wanted. It was a totally inaccurate picture but it revealed where their interests lay.

Thirdly, we see here a definite trend towards *cynicism*. They introduced and nurtured a culture of blame: '... but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.' That was, to put it mildly, unfair, but someone had to be blamed and they decided it should be Moses.

I can't help feeling there are lessons for us in our society today. We live in an age where many acknowledge that there must be some higher power, but they have no clear concept of a God of love and grace. Que sera sera. Kismet. Fate. Keep filling in those lottery numbers and Lady Luck may just smile on you. Fatalism.

We definitely live in a society that is obsessed with consumerism, with material things, evaluating our lives by the amount of money we can earn and the things we can buy. For some it's clothes, for some it's property, for many – just like the Israelites – it's food. Gluttony is still one of the deadly sins.

And do I need to spell out the cynicism that is gripping our society? It's in our humour. Every thread of the mass media is stained with it. Our youth are demoralised by it. Our schools are unwittingly promoting it. Teach a child that life has no higher purpose, that we are just a cosmic accident, that there is nothing after death, that we got here by the law of the jungle, and you shouldn't be surprised if life turns into a jungle. Cynicism very quickly spawns a culture of blame. It's never hard to find someone to blame.

These are the trends around us today and if we're not careful we can be tainted by them ourselves. Verse 3 resounds with the voices of the Israelites – not the Egyptians, the Israelites.

If verse 3 resounds with the voices of the people verse 4 responds with the voice of God. 'Then the LORD said to Moses, "I will rain down bread from heaven for you.'" God gave them a promise. He was going to provide in a miraculous way but that provision would come with a very clear set of instructions. 'I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions.' There were five of them.

1. The people are to go out each day.
2. The people are to gather enough for that day.
3. Each one is to gather as much as he needs.
4. No one is to keep any of it until morning.
5. On the sixth day they are to bring in twice as much as they gather on the other days.

Straight away there's a contrast between what the people said and what the LORD said, They said, 'We ate all the food we wanted.' I doubt if that was strictly true but that was how they remembered it. God said, 'They are to gather enough for that day.' Do you see the contrast? 'All they wanted' or 'enough for that day'. Greed or need? Jesus echoed this aspect of God's will in the prayer he taught the disciples. 'Give us this day our daily bread.'

We've heard the voice of the people: bitten by the bug of fatalism, consumerism and cynicism. We've heard the voice of the LORD, his promise, his commands, his test.

Now we hear the voices of Moses and Aaron.

Verses 6 to 8. 'So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, "In the evening you will know that it was the LORD who brought you out of Egypt, and in the morning you will see the glory of the LORD, because he has heard your grumbling against him. Who are we, that you should grumble against us?" Moses also said, "You will know that it was the LORD when he gives you meat to eat in the evening and all the bread

you want in the morning, because he has heard your grumbling against him. Who are we? You are not grumbling against us, but against the LORD.” Then Moses told Aaron, “Say to the entire Israelite community, ‘Come before the LORD, for he has heard your grumbling.’”

If you analyse what Moses said you’ll find a lot of repetition. At one time it was fashionable in scholarly circles to look at a passage like this and see it as evidence of different sources. Source criticism it was called. That’s nonsense. What we have here is the evidence of someone who was wound up, exasperated, close to breaking point.

What was it that Moses kept repeating? ‘You will know that it was the LORD who brought you out of Egypt,’ verse 6. ‘You will know that it was the LORD,’ verse 8. ‘Who are we, that you should grumble against us?’ verse 7. ‘Who are we?’ verse 8.

Moses was saying, ‘You’re not dealing with us. You’re dealing with the LORD.’ It’s very easy to get into a cycle of criticism in which the human leaders of the church get it in the neck. And it has to be said that more often than not it’s their wives who also become a target for people with a grievance. It’s not to say that human leaders never get things wrong, but it’s all too easy to treat the church like a human society or club and forget that we belong to the Lord. It’s his church. He is watching. He is listening.

The thing that was uppermost in Moses’ mind was the grumbling of the people. He mentions it five times in verses 7 to 9, that’s five times in just three verses. ‘He has heard your grumbling against him. ... Who are we, that you should grumble against us? ... He has heard your grumbling against him. ... You are not grumbling against us, but against the LORD. ... He has heard your grumbling.’

Against this backdrop of grumbling Moses pointed the people to God’s glory. Verse 7: ‘In the morning you will see the glory of the LORD.’ The sequel was verse 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.’ God’s glory was seen in a visible form, in a cloud. It was to be experienced in a tangible form, indeed, an edible form, quail for supper and manna for breakfast.

And what about that test? Did the Israelites pass? Did they honour God and keep his instructions? Verses 17 and 18 say, ‘The Israelites did as they were told. ... Each one gathered as much as he needed.’ They kept the first three instructions: to go out each day, to gather enough for that day, and to gather only as much as their household needed. But there were two more instructions. They were to keep none of it till the next morning, except for the sixth day when they were to gather double what they needed.

Verse 20 says that there were some people who ignored the fourth instruction. ‘Some of them paid no attention to Moses; they kept part of it until morning, but it was full of maggots and began to smell. So Moses was angry with them.’

On that basis the fifth instruction didn’t look too clever Surely the same thing would happen again. Verse 24 says, ‘They saved it until morning, as Moses commanded, and it did not stink or get maggots in it.’ When it came to the sixth day, Moses said, ‘Gather twice as much as you need because there won’t be any tomorrow.’

‘Nevertheless,’ we read in verse 27, ‘some of the people went out on the seventh day to gather it, but they found none.’

Verses 28–30 ‘Then the LORD said to Moses, “How long will you refuse to keep my commands and my instructions? Bear in mind that the LORD has given you the Sabbath; that is why on the sixth day he gives you bread for two days. Everyone is to stay where he is on the seventh day; no one is to go out.” So the people rested on the seventh day.’

Galatians 5:1, 13. 'It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. ... You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature ; rather, serve one another in love.'