

The Book of Exodus



10. Wassat? Exodus 16; John 6

You know how it is. Something has started well, but you know everything you do is going to be a challenge. Upwards of a million people fled from Egypt on Passover night and found themselves out in the desert heading for the Red Sea. It must have been an amazing sight and all with people who on a large scale had seen miracles in Egypt and now had the very presence of God in their midst in the pillars of cloud and fire. Their attitude was first triumphant and then the concern set in as they realised they were trapped at the Red Sea. Concern turned to prayer and consternation but all that was lifted as the people crossed the Red Sea and saw the Egyptians washed away.

Now they were in the wilderness of Sinai with their flocks and herds. Do you know what the food requirements for a million people with their herds and cattle. It's a massive number of people and although the wilderness of Sinai was probably wetter and greener than at present, it could in no way have supported that number of people.

There was massive elation at seeing the power of God and that you can read about in Exodus 15. But in chapter 16 reality and hunger were setting in. How was the population of a large city going to cope without food? The walk of faith can sometimes be a series of highs and lows in our journey rather like the Roman roads I showed you the other week. We can enjoy great times but often in our walk the going gets rough and we have to trust God implicitly without seeing a way through.

After two months their food was running out and the people complained. We may think that they were pretty grumpy and faithless but they were realists – there was no way they could survive in the environment they were in. It was quite clear that they were not going straight to the promised land and there was no prospect of improving the food supply. Their reality check showed that disaster was imminent – it was human to worry about what was going to happen because the inevitable consequences looked like a massive human tragedy.

I think we can see in these people a distinct difference between expressing concern at a way we can't see ahead, and allowing our concern to undermine our faith and destroy our relationships with one another. Following God's will, particularly as a group of people or as a church can be difficult. There are those, usually in leadership and others close to God who have a clear picture of what's going on. Then there are others in the church who have a varying degree of understanding of the issues and clarity as to God's will in a particular situation.

It would be nice to have everyone up to speed and having the same clarity of thought and depth of trust in the ways of God, but the truth is that in any body of people, some are going to be more confident than others. That's how it is when we consider how ideas filter down a church. The leaders may get a vision for something, but we need to understand that it takes a while for others to understand and feel convinced.

And that was true of the Israelites. Moses, Aaron and the leaders were happy to trust God, but there were significant numbers of people for whom the lack of food was a major knock to their confidence in God. *2 There in the desert they all complained to Moses and Aaron 3 and said to them, "We wish that the LORD had killed us in Egypt. There we could at least sit down and eat meat and as much other food as we wanted. But you have brought us out into this desert to starve us all to death."*

But God of course, had it all sorted, understood their hearts and the problem was solved in the usual spectacular style! First they had some meat – a flock of quails. It was a massive flock of quails. A miraculously large flock of quails. Quite amazing. Where did they come from? How did so many appear that it fed a nation overnight? Only the word "miracle" can explain it.

So here were the Israelites, full from having their evening meal of quail, praising God for the meal, but wondering what was going to feed them on a regular basis. They come out of their tents in the morning and the ground is covered with white stuff. "What's that?" "Wassat!" It's amazing! They've never seen anything like it before. And as they found out "What's that" appeared every day except Saturday and tasted really good. What was amazing, like doorstep milk deliveries except they didn't have to pay for it! It came every day which was just as well as it went off, except on a Saturday where it didn't go off until Sunday where they got a new batch anyway. So they called it "What's that?" - manna.

Like the crossing of the Red sea, people have tried rational explanations for manna. If you want to have a look at some, have a look at the entry for Manna in Wikipedia. It's not the most reliable source of anything but it's well on the right lines – there are lots of theories. All well and good but all are small scale secretions that occur naturally. Nothing explains how this stuff occurred daily on an industrial scale. It's another complete miracle. And there it was in front of their eyes and in their stomachs for 40 years.

Like the miracles of the plagues, of the presence of God and the parting of the Red Sea, manna was an enduring reminder of the presence of God for the 40 years in the desert. It sustained them completely.

As we walk through the desert of life with all its stresses and strains or face the spiritual lows, what do we look to to sustain us – our income, our husband or wife, our family, our job, our friends? Or do we look to Jesus? And our problems and spiritual hunger are often worse when we take our eyes off Jesus and try to fill the gap with something and someone else.

And we don't have to look far to see that the Israelites quickly took their eyes off God and did their own thing. Yes even though miracles went on in their presence daily for 40 years! Isn't it easy to take God for granted? We can become so familiar with His ways that we no longer see the miracle of salvation and the daily presence of His Spirit in our lives and the lives of others. And what do we do? We moan and groan about the hard time God is giving us: and we don't see what He's up to now, we don't hear His voice so we don't follow Him as we should.

I've frequently heard it said "if only we had more miracles today, more people would believe". I know lots of churches where they make this an important part of their ministry. It's amazing when we see God do marvellous things and what I've encouraged us to do is to look at our own lives and we'll see marvellous things – we just need to ask God to open our eyes to them. But more miracles in themselves don't bring people to Christ. Spectacle always draws a crowd.

Jesus realised that. People saw how he fed 5000 and came back; not to find out how He did it and what God was trying to say to them through Him: they were just after another stunt.

John 6:26 (TEV) Jesus answered, "I am telling you the truth: you are looking for me because you ate the bread and had all you wanted, not because you understood my miracles.

27 Do not work for food that spoils; instead, work for the food that lasts for eternal life. This is the food which the Son of Man will give you, because God, the Father, has put his mark of approval on him."

28 So they asked him, "What can we do in order to do what God wants us to do?"

29 Jesus answered, "What God wants you to do is to believe in the one he sent."

30 They replied, "What miracle will you perform so that we may see it and believe you? What will you do?"

What did they want? They saw one miracle and wanted another. Why didn't they believe the first time? The truth is that they saw faith as hunting after a shot – a special meal – a trip to MacDonald's and did not see that they needed a God who was going to feed them day by day and build their faith up properly. And here we have it:

29 Jesus answered, "What God wants you to do is to believe in the one he sent."

30 They replied, "What miracle will you perform so that we may see it and believe you? What will you do?"

31 Our ancestors ate manna in the desert, just as the scripture says, "He gave them bread from heaven to eat."

32 "I am telling you the truth," Jesus said. "What Moses gave you was not the bread from heaven; it

is my Father who gives you the real bread from heaven.

33 For the bread that God gives is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

34 "Sir," they asked him, "give us this bread always."

35 "I am the bread of life," Jesus told them. "Those who come to me will never be hungry; those who believe in me will never be thirsty.

36 Now, I told you that you have seen me but will not believe.

The people were after another free meal like the feeding of the 5000 as they quoted the story of manna. But Jesus points to the real bread of heaven – the real manna.

I spoke a moment ago about those times in our lives when we are on to a low – and those times when we have a spiritual hunger which we have a problem with? What do we want out of our faith? To see answers to prayer? To see things happen in the church? What will make a difference to our church. The answer's here: Jesus said: *"I am the bread of life," Jesus told them. "Those who come to me will never be hungry; those who believe in me will never be thirsty. "*

As so often happens with my morning and evening services at the moment. The items are conceived separately but the message is the same. If we desire to walk in God's will and in God's way, then we need to spend time with Him. Time alone, time together as God's people and ask Him to feed us more of the living bread – Jesus – in doing so, we will sense His presence more, we will see His ways and hear His voice – and we'll see Him glorified even more in people's lives, in our lives and in His church.

Let's pray.

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