

# **God sustains us**

## **Sermon Exodus 16:1-15**

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About half of all people in Egypt earn less than 10 pound per day. Millions of people go to bed hungry each night, because they are simply too poor to buy good enough food. This week I saw on CNN that even in a wealthy country like the United States, 46 million people live below the poverty line.

Many parents worldwide cry to God, or to gods, for bread and water for their children. How horrible if you cannot feed your own children. Where is God in such circumstances?

God is King; He rules the universe. In our readings from the Old Testament we are going through the book of Exodus, and we have seen how God saved Israel from poverty and slavery in Egypt. He rules! The Pharaohs of this world may think they are important, but don't be fooled by appearances.

But after being saved from Egypt, and after a month of travelling through the desert Israel had no more food. No more food... and this began to sink in after Israel had just had a great time in the oasis of Elim where there was plenty of food and water.

### **1 We grumble so easily**

In Elim there had been plenty of water, shadow, and rest. After a few weeks of travelling, Israel must have felt great, relaxing in that oasis. God gives his people moments of rest in the journey of life. I think we all, sometimes, experience these oasis-moments of joy, of the nearness of God himself.

But life is a journey, and if we want to serve God on the journey, it is often not easy at all. We just have to look at our own lives and at the life of the church. There is so much pain and hardship.

When Israel in the desert met hardship, it began to grumble. The word 'grumble' is used seven times in this chapter. After only one month in the desert, Israel believed that in Egypt they had so much meat and bread, I am sure they exaggerated how much food they had, and they forgot about the downside, slavery.

Mathew Henry, one of the English preachers a few centuries ago, said so wisely: "Discontent magnifies what is past, and vilifies what is present, without regard to truth or reason."

What would you do if you would not know how to feed your children tomorrow? Be honest, we Christians also complain a lot! Think of your

own insecurity, stress in your work, fears for the future.

The cause of grumbling is a lack of faith and hope in the faithfulness of our Savior. This is a dangerous attitude. Many Israelites were saved from Egypt but only a few were allowed to enter into the Promised Land. The rest died in the desert. Not because God wanted this to happen. He wanted to give the people all they needed on their journey! But often they so distrusted him, and this lack of trust was their downfall.

The people feared the lack of food and water, so they grumbled against Moses. This was grumbling against the Lord. Read this in Exodus 16:8.

I believe pastors should never use these verses to stop their church members complaining. As pastors we must always first wonder whether their church members are actually right! But members of the church should wonder whether criticizing their leadership might be grumbling against God.

### **2 God cares for us on life's journey**

In defense of the grumblers of Israel: Interestingly, it is rewarded! What would have happened if they had said nothing? We do not know. But I do know that God prefers angry people over indifferent people. At least, if people grumble, you can talk back and solve a problem. If they only fret in their heart, or they really do not care about how things go in their life or in church, it is much harder to help them.

There are moments when grumbling, when action is needed. When governments abuse their people we have the right to speak up and to stand up. When your pastor preaches nonsense, you must do something. When your electrician repairs your wires in a manner that is dangerous, please, by all means, grumble!

Israel grumbled against God. As if he who saved them from the mighty armies of Pharaoh could not save them from starvation. But instead of punishing them, God blessed them. He is JHWH, the God of the covenant. God had saved Israel from Egypt, and he also sustains them on the road through the wilderness because He had promised to lead them to the Promised Land. So He does not punish but He gives them exactly what they complained of not having: Meat and bread. His provision is fast, sufficient, and constant.

The Lord who brought the out of Egypt is not going to abandon them; he manifests his glory by dominating nature; he has not brought them out to die, but to make sure that they survive in spite of difficulties.

Does he always do this? No. Christians in areas of poverty also die of hunger, just like their atheist or Muslim or Hindu neighbors.

Why is this? I have no answer. It would be true to say that God has given enough food on earth for all people, and that hunger is mostly the result of wars, or the lack of proper distribution of food. But how does this answer satisfy the mother and father who pray God for help because they cannot feed their children? How does this help mothers in Somalia who have their children die in their arms?

There is so much misery in the world, even for those who humbly and reverently obey their Lord Jesus Christ. But let us do what we can to help others in need, and first see where our own responsibilities as humankind are before we blame God.

In the story we have read from the book of Exodus, we see that at that time, God provided food to all people – quail’s meat in the evenings, manna in the mornings. This was an unmistakable miracle, and it continued for 40 years, until the people came at the borders of the Promised Land.

The people never lacked food, and they never had too much. God gave them just enough – and that is what we all should be satisfied with. Enough.

St John Chrysostom, a church father from the 4<sup>th</sup> century, said in one of his sermons that the Egyptians with their pots of meat were gluttons, and the Hebrews had to learn to give up this sin of gluttony. God gave them just enough, day by day.

“Our culture exhibits a schizophrenic attitude toward gluttony”, the American author Francine Prose writes in a delightful book titled *Gluttony*. Just watch TV for a while:

One minute we’re bombarded with images of food, advertisements for restaurants, or the latest sweet or fatty snack, with recipes and cooking tips. A minute later, we’re reminded that eating is tantamount to suicide, that indulgence and enjoyment equals social isolation and self destruction. And someone is making money from both sides of our ambivalence.

First we eat, then we diet, then we eat more again.

Exodus 16:4 says that the people of Israel had to collect a days portion of Manna each day. This concept of daily provision, just enough, is reflected

in the Lord’s Prayer: Give us today our daily bread. Just as God took care of Israel on its journey, he promises us all we need (not all we want!) if we pray. He saved us, and he wants to sustain us day by day. This we may expect from our Lord.

His help to us is for enabling us to reach his eternal Kingdom, and for serving him while on our life’s journey. There is no promise of luxury in the Bible; there is a promise of the presence of God for those who desire to serve him.

The manna we read about in Exodus is not about God’s general sustenance to Israel at that time only. It clearly also points to our Lord Jesus Christ – the bread of life, the bread of the World that came down from heaven.

### **3 Jesus is God’s sustenance for us**

Jesus miraculously fed thousands of people – you know the story, when these people only had a few pieces of bread and fish with them, Jesus helped the poor, the have-nots, and people in grave need. These were the people of God in need of help.

The miraculous feeding of these people happened on the Eastern side of the Sea of Galilee – in the wilderness. I think the Gospel writers purposely underline that this happened in a deserted place. It reminded the people of the story of how Israel in the desert was fed with bread by God.

Jesus explained the lesson of the feeding of the people: it should make people understand that He is able to give people the food that endures to eternal life. Not our welfare in this earthly life, but eternity should have our prime interest. See ye first the kingdom of God, and God will sustain you. For a Christian, this should be the sequence. God first, belly second.

The Jews did not really believe Jesus and his claims about being the savior of the world, even after they saw him feed thousands of people with just a few loaves of bread.

So they asked him to prove his words. Read now John 6:30-35.

Jesus does not just *give* us some bread that gives us eternal life. He says that he himself *is* that bread. He does not *give* a sign; He *is* the sign. He is the Bread that God gave from heaven for the eternal salvation of mankind. The incarnation, the coming of the Son of God to our world, is the great message of the Church.

Jesus points us to that other life, beyond what we can see and touch. He points our hearts and our minds to the realm of God his Father, the dimension of the Spirit in which we live, and that surrounds us, invisibly, everywhere. ‘Seek ye first seek the Kingdom of God’, is what Jesus tells

these poor followers of him who were so worried about how to buy food, and clothing.

## **Conclusion**

God helped Israel on its journey through the desert – with just enough to serve him. Let us be satisfied with how our Lord cares for us in our life's journey.

God saved us through Jesus Christ; on our journey through life, our focus is on serving Him; and if we do so, He helps us. What comfort that God offers himself in bread and wine to be part of your life, to sustain you, to bless you with communion with Him – even in the midst of your present problems or headaches or worries - of whatever sort they are.

That road with God through life is painful sometimes, but always rewarding, as we know that the God of heaven and earth is with us to strengthen us and to guide us into evermore obedience. And part of this obedience, is to care for other people in need. For those who need our help.

May Holy Communion today be an oasis-experience, where God gives you rest, and joy, and peace, and strength for the road.

We open our hands as a cup, to receive from Him what we need. He feeds you by giving Himself to you, the Bread of Life. And by doing so, he helps us to cope with our hike through the wilderness and to help other people on the road.

**+ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.**