

EXODUS 16-18 - THE GLORY OF THE LORD

Have you ever been driven to the point of exasperation by someone who just doesn't seem to get it? I have to confess to feeling really annoyed with the Israelites as I read chapter 16 and the first part of chapter 17. It seems like it was one step forward and three back and that they never seemed to learn anything. They just didn't seem to get it. I ended up feeling like they were behaving like ungrateful, untrusting, disobedient, spoilt little brats who never learnt anything and were never satisfied.

THE ISRAELITE'S BEHAVIOUR

They were just over a month into their trip [16:1] and they were failing to join the dots again. This time they grizzled about lack of food and water.

Grumbling

Trying to feed that number of people in a desert area must have been a logistical nightmare and food was running low. They grumbled against Moses, longing again for Egypt where they figured they at least had all the food they could eat [16:3]. It seems that they still didn't trust that the Lord was bringing them through and that he was still proving himself faithful to his promise. It was as though they hadn't learnt a single thing out of what had happened at Marah.

God once again worked a miracle for them and provided manna and quail, but within a short space of time they were grizzling again, this time about lack of water [17:2]. What they didn't seem to realise was that, because Moses was God's appointed leader of the people, when they grumbled against Moses they were in actual fact grumbling against him [16:8]. Given what they'd already seen happen more than once, why didn't they go straight to God and ask him for his provision instead of grizzling at Moses and longing for Egypt? Would they never learn?

Disobedient

Further, they couldn't even be obedient in other things either. Having provided manna for them, God told them that they should eat all of it and not leave any over for the next day [16:19]. He also told them that on the 6th day they should collect enough for two days' supply [16:5, 21-26]. This was God's provision for the needs of the people, but it was also a test as to whether or not they would be obedient [16:4]. Unfortunately, some of them couldn't follow very clear instruction. Some kept the manna overnight and some went out collecting on the Sabbath.

I can recall an occasion when our grandson was around 18 months old and was at our place. He was right up against the TV and was touching the screen. At that age he pretty much knew what the word 'no' meant and when I called out he quickly removed his hand. He then turned around, looked me in the eye and, while he was still looking at me, moved his hand out and touched the TV again! The look on his face said something like, "I know I'm not supposed to do this but I'm going to anyway and what are you going to do about it?" That's pretty much the same as what the Israelites were doing here. It's almost as though there was an element among the people who deliberately went their own way and flouted what God had commanded them to do. It was as though they were testing God's boundaries like naughty little children.

Their faithless grumbling and disobedience are the reasons why I came away with the feeling that they were petulant, self-centred whingers who were never satisfied and who never seemed to learn anything. What scares me is how much I see of myself in them. I can't point any fingers at the Israelites because I know I do the very same things myself. There are times when I'm never satisfied; that no matter how much I have it is either never enough or it's the wrong thing. Just like them, there are times when I feel as though I don't learn, from one situation to the next, especially in regard to faith. I too fail to trust and will grizzle to others instead of humbly approaching God for his gracious response. Moses didn't get everything right, and he had a pretty shaky start, but he at least seems to have learnt something and grown in his faith in God. May that also be true of me/us.

GOD'S RESPONSE

It seems to me that the Israelites needed a good telling off and told to grow up and stop acting like selfish teenagers. But we talked before about how God was patient with the Egyptians and now we see how patient he was with the Israelites.

God Provides

God's gracious and merciful response to the people in providing bread, meat and water stands in complete contrast to their grizzling.

I have a question: If God had promised to provide for them, and had already shown himself to be true to that promise, how come they had to get to the point of desperation before he did something? Why couldn't he have provided food for them straight away instead of making them experience hunger? I don't know the exact answer to that, but I wonder if part of it was God testing them to see if they had learnt anything and would walk the path of faith in him. He had patiently put up with their grizzling and had graciously responded to them; surely they would have learnt that the best thing to do was to go straight to him and ask rather than grizzle at Moses? Unfortunately, it seems that they had learnt nothing.

The Glory of the Lord

While the Lord gave them what they needed and shut them up from their grizzling, the larger point of it all was to reveal his glory and to show the people that he truly was Lord (as if they still needed showing that!) [16:6-8]. With that in view, there's something tucked away in the middle of this story which I think is nothing short of amazing and gracious. It's almost a throwaway line and very little is made of it in the story. While Aaron was telling the people to come before the Lord (presumably with humble thanks) because he had heard them, this happened:

Exodus 16:10 (NIV)

¹⁰While 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.

Was this the same cloud they saw moving before them as they headed towards the promised land? It might have been, but I'm guessing that even if it was, something different and out of the ordinary must have happened for it to be specifically mentioned. To get an idea of what it could have been like, we can leap ahead to something that happens later in the story:

Exodus 24:15-17 (NIV)

¹⁵When Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it, ¹⁶and the glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai. For six days the cloud covered the mountain, and on the seventh day the LORD called to Moses from within the cloud. ¹⁷To the Israelites the glory of the LORD looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain.

That must have been amazing. It was a gracious, tangible, visual action on behalf of God to show that he was present with his people and that he would provide. It was an act of assurance on his behalf and was designed to show them that he truly was Lord.

That's why it's surprising that the people never seemed to learn. God performed wonders and gave them tangible signs like the cloud that he was present with them, but it didn't seem to make any difference to the people in terms of building them up in their faith. As soon as something bad happened, it was as though nothing had changed. During the week I was reading these verses from Mark:

Mark 4:24-25 (NIV)

²⁴“Consider carefully what you hear,” he continued. “With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more. ²⁵Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.”

It seems to me this is where the people fell down – they didn't carefully consider what they saw and heard because if they had we would have seen more evidence of them walking the path of faith. There's an implied warning in what Jesus said, so this is something of which we should take careful notice. May we not be like the Israelites, lurching from one situation of lack of faith to another. May we carefully consider what we hear through God's word and Spirit, actively seeking to be moulded and shaped by him.