

**Trinity Baptist Church
Sunday 23rd August 2020. Andy Banks.**

**3. God's Provision
Ex 16:1-5, 13-16, 31-33; Ex 15:22-25, 27; 17:1-7;
Num 21:4-5; Deut 29:5-6**

Props:

Blindfold and food to taste

Or pen and paper and pictures of foods.

Intro:

We're continuing our summer mini-series, exploring how God sustained the Israelites through their tough interim normal in the wilderness, as they journeyed from slavery in Egypt to the abundant life God had promised them in Canaan. And we're asking what we can learn from how God sustained them that can help us maintain hope through our interim normal as we emerge from lockdown, but still experience many restrictions.

Two weeks ago, we looked at God's unchanging character conveyed in his name: I AM WHO I AM. Last week, we explored his continual presence and guidance through the pillar of cloud and fire. And this week is all about God's Provision along the way.

But we're going to kick off with a choice of games, both called, "What Is it?"

Option one was sent out to you ahead of time. Someone was to prepare a new dish of food for instance, and the rest of the family have to taste it (preferably blindfolded) and try to guess the ingredients.

Option two is an on-screen quiz. An extreme close up of ten food items will appear on the screen. You have to guess what the food is before each answer appears.

Game: What is it?

[Pause to play game]

So how easy did you find it to guess what the food items or ingredients were? Now, you were working with food or ingredients you had (probably) at least heard of. But the Israelites in the wilderness were given food that was entirely new to them, and so they called it "Manna," which means "What is it?" Let's read the account from Exodus 16.

Exodus 16:1-5, 13-15, 31

***1**The whole Israelite community set out from Elim, and on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had left Egypt, they came to the desert of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai. **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."*

4The LORD said to Moses, "Now I am going to cause food to rain down from the sky for all of you. The people must go out every day and gather enough for that day. In this way I can test them to find out if they will follow my instructions. 5On the sixth day they are to bring in twice as much as usual and prepare it." ...

13In the evening a large flock of quails flew in, enough to cover the camp, and in the morning there was dew all around the camp. 14When the dew evaporated, there was something thin and flaky on the surface of the desert. It was as delicate as frost. 15When the Israelites saw it, they didn't know what it was and asked each other, "What is it?"

Moses said to them, "This is the food that the LORD has given you to eat ...

31The people of Israel called the food manna. It was like a small white seed, and tasted like thin cakes made with honey.

There's something understandable about the Israelites' complaint. They were hungry. They had no food. And they couldn't see how they could possibly find food in the desert. Most people would worry if they had no food and no way to get food. But their complaint still betrayed a distinct failure to trust God – the God who was visibly ever-present with them in a pillar of cloud and fire, who miraculously freed them from slavery in Egypt, parted the Red Sea so they could cross on dry land, and made bitter water sweet for them so they could drink it (we'll look at that a bit more later in the service). Given all that God had already done for them, and all that he had promised them, they should have had greater trust that he had not led them into the wilderness to die, but would find a way to meet their needs in this interim normal they were going through.

But what about us? Do we worry about the future or choose to trust it to God? The God who provided manna every day to meet the Israelites' basic need in the wilderness is the same God we worship. Since his character does not change, we *can* rely on him to provide us with *everything* we need for life and godliness. And that's not just about our physical needs for food, water, clothing, shelter and warmth. He will provide for all our emotional, spiritual and interpersonal needs as well. And he will sustain us through whatever tough times we encounter. That may not always *feel* like true. But we need to choose to believe that it is true, especially when life gets harder.

Do you believe that God will help us all through this interim normal of continuing Covid restrictions, and bring us safely to an abundant new normal when Covid-19 will be under control?

[Song]

Children, you may wish to complete some of the activities posted on our website, while I continue to talk. I have another four short readings, the first three occurring during the wilderness wanderings; the last featured in Moses' summary of those years for the next generation as they stood on the edge of the Promised Land.

Exodus 15:22-25, 27

22Then Moses led the people of Israel away from the Red Sea into the desert of Shur. For three days they walked through the desert, but found no water. 23Then they came to a place called Marah, but the water there was so bitter that they could not drink it. That is why it was named Marah. 24The people complained to Moses and asked, "What are we going to drink?" 25Moses prayed earnestly to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a piece of wood, which he threw into the water; and the water became fit to drink ...

27Next they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs and seventy palm trees; there they camped by the water.

Exodus 17:1-7

1The whole Israelite community left the desert of Sin, moving from one place to another at the command of the LORD. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water there to drink. 2They complained to Moses and said, "Give us water to drink."

Moses answered, "Why are you complaining? Why are you putting the LORD to the test?"

3But the people were very thirsty and continued to complain to Moses. They said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt? To kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?"

4Moses prayed earnestly to the LORD and said, "What can I do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me."

5The LORD said to Moses, "Take some of the leaders of Israel with you, and go on ahead of the people. Take along the stick with which you struck the Nile. 6I will stand before you on a rock at Mount Sinai. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink." Moses did so in the presence of the leaders of Israel.

7The place was named Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites complained and put the LORD to the test when they asked, "Is the LORD with us or not?"

Numbers 21:4(b)-5

4b ... on the way the people lost their patience 5and spoke against God and Moses. They complained, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt to die in this desert, where there is no food or water? We can't stand any more of this miserable food!"

Deuteronomy 29:5-6

5For forty years the LORD led you through the desert, and your clothes and sandals never wore out. 6You did not have bread to eat or wine or beer to drink, but the LORD provided for your needs in order to teach you that he is your God.

So what can we learn from God's provisions for the Israelites in their interim normal to help us through ours?

1) **God provides all that is needed, not all that is wanted**

Firstly, we learn that God provides *all* that is *needed*, but not necessarily all that is *wanted*. The Israelites needed drinkable water, food, clothing and shoes that did not wear out, protection from enemies and wild animals, etc. – alongside God's presence and his guidance. And that is what he gave them. But when they craved *meat* in Exodus 16, although God sent them quails, he sent so many that they made the Israelites sick at the sight of them. And when, in Numbers 21, they moaned again about the food they were given and desired, once again, to return to slavery in Egypt, God sent poisonous snakes among them, which caused many of them to die.

Likewise, in our interim normal, we cannot demand from God an *easy* life, but we can trust that he *will* supply all our *needs* – emotional, spiritual and interpersonal as well as physical. So, it is right to pray for protection from Covid-19 itself for ourselves, our families and the communities of which we are a part (though not as an alternative to taking sensible precautions ourselves). It is right to pray that God will keep us in employment, or find us new work if we do lose our jobs. But that may not be our dream job. It is right to pray that our children will cope with the return to a different way of doing school. It is right to pray that, whatever our children's GCSE and A-level results, God will guide them on good paths. And it is right to pray that everyone will be enriched and sustained in their faith and feel an integral part of the community at Trinity, whether they can meet in person or continue to access the services online. These are basic needs, and God will supply all our needs.

2) God provides in different ways

Secondly, we learn that God provides in a variety of *different* ways. He blew quail in on the wind, but sent the manna down miraculously. Likewise, God supplied their water in different ways. On one occasion there was water, but it was undrinkable. Did God show Moses a natural remedy or perform a miracle through an act of obedience? Either could be true. On another occasion, there appeared to be no water, but when Moses struck a rock it gushed out. Again, this may have been miraculous, or God may have simply opened Moses' eyes to a geological reality. What would *certainly* have been miraculous, at a later stage, is if Moses had obeyed God and spoken to the rock to produce water, instead of striking it. But clearly, God used different methods at different times to provide water for his people, including sometimes simply leading them to a place where there was an abundance of wells. It doesn't have to be miraculous to be God's provision.

3) God provides in a way that teaches trust and obedience

It is also clear from these incidents is that God did more than simply provide water and food. For he provided in such a way as to *teach* them to *trust* and *obey* him on a daily basis. If they *listened* to him, they would have water. If they *trusted* him, they would have their daily food. But, if they tried to store it up for the next day – failing to trust his future provision – then it rotted. Except on the day before the Sabbath, when, to enable them to keep God's command to rest one day a week, they collected enough for two days, and it *didn't* rot. Looking too far ahead can cause unnecessary worry. So, maybe one of the lessons to learn in this interim normal is to take each day as it comes and to trust *God* to provide for the future.

4) God's provides in a way that endorses his chosen leaders

Fourthly, God provided in a way that endorsed his chosen leader. Because God involved that leader powerfully in his daily provisions for his people. This was particularly important, because the Israelites were very prone to challenging Moses' leadership through the tough journey in the wilderness.

And let me say that can be a disease in churches too. No leader is infallible, of course, which is why we favour a collective leadership. Even as a collective leadership, we can get things wrong, which is why the *final* authority in a Baptist Church rests with the Church Members' Meeting. The theory is that the more people there are listening for God's voice, the greater the protection against error. But that is only true if members are indeed seeking to listen for *God's* voice, not pushing their own agendas. My experience at Trinity is that we generally do that pretty well, but we can't take that for granted. Sadly, there *are* many Baptist Churches where Church Members' Meetings are used as vehicle for *dissent against* the leadership, rather than *discernment with* the leadership. And there are also those who will chunter away after meetings, refusing to accept decisions that are made, because they don't like them. We do well to heed the warnings from the Israelites' wilderness experiences, because it is clear that God does not like an insubordinate spirit that sets itself against the leaders he has chosen.

5) God's provisions can too easily be taken for granted

And that leads us on to the last lesson we need to hear today. The reality is that God's provisions can too easily be taken for granted. God provided for all the Israelites' needs, daily. But time and again they grumbled and groaned instead of thanking him. Yes, against Moses. But really against God. God had dramatically freed them from slavery in Egypt and was with them constantly in a visible pillar of cloud or fire. Yet they still asked in Exodus 17:7: "Is the LORD with us or not?" God miraculously provided all the food they needed every day, yet all

they can do in Numbers 21:5 is state, “We can't stand any more of this miserable food!” No wonder God was angry with them!

And it's easy in this post-lockdown interim world to long for what it was like before. Even to long for what it was like during lockdown. One of the common responses to the questionnaire we sent out was the expectation that the interim normal of meeting together would be a lesser experience than digital church, and sometimes that was given as the primary reason for not wanting to come. Now, I understand and appreciate that perspective, partly because things do feel restricted, partly because we didn't in the questionnaire present a clear vision of what services could look like under such restrictions – deliberately so we could hear ideas from others – and partly because the team has done such a good job of producing a good quality digital church.

But, it is possible to get too comfortable with personal convenience to the detriment of mutual encouragement. Hebrews 10:25 urges us (with good reason), “Let us not give up the habit of meeting together.” Why? Because we need one another in this Christian walk. Church *won't* feel the same as it did pre-lockdown. But meeting together remains incredibly important. And this interim hybrid-church offers the opportunity to get back into the habit of meeting together and being a community together.

Of course, there are people for whom returning to physical meetings is not safe, or does not feel safe. If that is you, please don't feel pressurised to return. But if you *could* come back but won't solely because you don't think it will be worth it, I want to urge you to think more widely than your own personal preferences and with a longer-term view than the immediate. This is a part of the journey that we need to travel together, trusting in God's provision and promised presence, in order to get to the eventual new abundant normal that we will be able to enjoy when Covid-19 is finally and fully under control fully, and restrictions can be lifted. Let us not, by then, have lost the good habit of meeting together. Amen?