

The God who provides

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[0 : 00] If you've got your Bible with you, it'd be great to keep that kind of fairly long chunk open in front of you as we work our way through that together this morning. I don't know if you've ever had to spend long recently on a customer care hotline.

You'll know these can be a fairly soul-destroying event, terrible kind of music, endless waiting. The low point for me is always the new bit where you have to talk to a robot, which kind of purposefully mishears what you say and sends you back to the start of the whole process.

You know, pretty hard work, not really an enjoyable way of spending time. Well, I read this week about someone who'd complained to his electricity supplier about the customer service he'd received, and I'm sure that's probably quite common.

But his complaint was this, that he said he'd received an exceptionally high quality of customer service. And he was complaining because he thought this company were obviously wasting his money training people in call centers when they could be making his bills smaller.

And so it seems that we're kind of experts, aren't we, at finding things to complain about, to grumble about, to be unhappy about. And that is what we see in the passage that we're looking at this morning.

[1 : 14] This is the first bit of the book of Exodus, which is set outside of Egypt. So if you were here with us last week and in previous weeks, you might remember last week we saw that incredible event where God parted the Red Sea and the people walked out of Egypt on dry land to their freedom.

They're outside of Pharaoh's borders. They've escaped from this land where they've been slaves for hundreds of years. There's no longer any threat from the Egyptian army, which God has destroyed.

Surely we think, well, this is all good, isn't it? You know, the people must be pretty chuffed. And yet actually what we see is that despite all this, despite what they've seen, what are the people doing?

They're grumbling. It seems incredible, isn't it? And yet perhaps even more incredible is what we see is that in the face of the people's grumbling, God provides.

So God doesn't say, all right, that's it. You know, I've had enough, get lost. You've got an ungrateful bunch. God provides for these grumbling people. And he continues to do that. You might have noticed as Jill read that there was a couple of kind of linked stories.

[2 : 27] The end of chapter 15, the people grumble about not having any water and God provides. It's kind of like a preview to chapter 16 where the people grumble this time about a lack of food and God provides.

If we'd have carried on reading into chapter 17, actually we'd have seen the same thing again. The people again grumbling about a lack of water. And again, God graciously giving his people what they need.

And so those are the two kind of key elements in this section of Exodus. These two key elements that we're going to look at this morning. People grumbling and God providing.

And as we look at that, kind of beyond that, we see how God's provision ultimately provides the answer, the remedy for us in our grumbling.

Because this is certainly not something that we're immune to. So let's have a look at those two things. First up, the people grumble. You see that there at the end of chapter 15, don't you?

[3 : 26] It's been three days. Three days since the Israelites crossed the Red Sea in this miraculous way. Three days since they left Egypt and slavery behind them.

Three days since they sang the song in the first half of chapter 15, which talks all about how God will reign forever. A celebration of God, that God will lead his people. People, it's been three days.

And now they need water. And what is their reaction? Well, as we said, they grumble. And the water they find is bitter. It can't be drunk. Only three days since this incredible rescue.

Straight away, they've forgotten about God and his care for them. And we see that again in chapter 16. This time, they're grumbling about the lack of food. And what do they say? Look at verse 3.

Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full? For you have brought us into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.

[4 : 30] Already they've completely forgotten what life in Egypt was like. Right back in chapter 1 of Exodus, kind of setting the scene, we're told that the Israelites were being ruthlessly enslaved.

And we're told that their life was bitter. This was a miserable existence. And yet here they are. They remember it as a kind of all-inclusive holiday package. You know, they're lying around about the meat pot.

They're kind of drinking all they can. They remember it as this kind of sunny holiday. It wasn't that. How quickly they forget. And as we read that, we can't help but think, can we, how on earth could these people grumble?

How on earth can they be so forgetful? How on earth can they be so ungrateful? How on earth can they be so ungrateful? After all God's done? And it's true, isn't it? And yet before we go too far in kind of bashing the Israelites, we perhaps need to turn the focus on ourselves as well, don't we?

We said a number of times that the book of Exodus, in the book of Exodus we see a model of the gospel. We see a model of how God saves his people. And yet what we also see here, and we're going to see this more as we carry on through Exodus, is a reflection of ourselves as those people who are being saved.

[5 : 48] And what we're going to see is we see this week, and time and time again, it's not a particularly pretty picture. You know, as I was looking at these kind of grumbling Israelites this week, I fairly quickly started to think, sounds a bit like me.

It's not completely true. I fairly quickly started to think, oh, that sounds like other people that I know. And then gradually it kind of honed in. I thought, hang on a minute. This is me as well. We're good at kind of spotting this in other people, aren't we?

Isn't so-and-so a misery guts? Why is that person always complaining? We're quick to say, oh, that's not helpful. That's not a positive thing. And yet all of us, if we're really honest, and we have to admit this is something that we engage in.

We love to grumble. All of us sitting here will be able to think of things we've grumbled about in the last day or week or month. We love to talk about how bad things are, how unfair they are.

And it's really important as we talk about this that it's not to deny for a second that actually we do go through hard times. And that's the same here for the Israelites, isn't it? Three days without water, you know, that's a serious situation.

[6 : 51] Being in a desert without food, you know, that's a serious problem. These are real issues for the Israelites. And yet I suppose the question we want to look at here is why does that move us so quickly to grumbling?

And perhaps is there any alternative to that? Now we see the reason for the grumbling here in Exodus. Just like we said, like the Israelites, we're so quick to grumble because we're so quick to forget what God has done.

Or perhaps we've never fully kind of realized or accepted that in the first place. Just like the Israelites, we're experts as well as deceiving ourselves. Things were great back then, you know, without God things were all rosy.

And actually that's not the case. Just like the Israelites, we probably think, well, if God would just do this one thing for me, if God would just do something spectacular, well, you know, then I would never grumble anymore.

Then I'd be happy. And yet these people have seen the most miraculous event possibly in the whole of the Old Testament. And yet here they are three days later.

[7 : 56] You know, what have you done for us lately, God, they say. They grumble. And we grumble because we forget who God is. We forget what he's done. And so that means that the kind of grumbling is not a little thing.

It's not just a kind of harmless thing. But actually the Bible says our grumbling is against God. Elsewhere in the Bible, these events here, these chapters are described as the people testing God.

They're denying God's power. They're saying that God isn't sufficient. They're saying that God doesn't care for his people, that he's not going to do what he's promised. That's what our grumbling says.

And I think this is such a kind of a practical message. This is thousands of years ago. And it's so relevant for us today, isn't it? We talk about, as a church, wanting to be a joyful community. See, we say that actually that's not just us kind of geeing ourselves up to be happy.

But actually the message of the Bible, the gospel, should make us joyful. It's interesting to think, well, what does that actually mean? What does that look like? And I think really the idea is that it's the opposite of being a grumbling people.

[9 : 03] It's kind of such a nitty-gritty, such a down-to-earth area of life. Where being a Christian should make us stand out and look different. Where accepting the gospel kind of offers an alternative to the usual way of life.

And so what is that alternative? Well, this is a really important thing I want to make really clear. The alternative to grumbling is not pretending everything is fine.

The alternative to grumbling is not just kind of, you know, suck it up or, you know, have a stiff upper lip or, you know, just don't tell anyone. That's not the alternative to grumbling. And actually that's what so much of the world's kind of advice boils down to.

I was looking at various things on the internet this week. All sorts of kind of quotes and slogans and platitudes about not grumbling. And to be honest, it didn't really feel as though any of them were written by people going through hard times.

It didn't really feel as though any of them were written by people in the midst of real rubbish situations. It felt like people kind of casually giving advice from afar.

[10 : 16] And yet that is not the Christian alternative. The Bible, Christianity, never denies the hardship of life. Instead, the Bible says that we can be honest with God.

That we can be honest with each other and we can bring these real life problems to God in trust rather than in accusation. And that was the problem with the Israelites.

It was that straight away, even after all that God had done, straight away these challenges, this heat that they were facing, what was their response? They were against God. They doubted his goodness.

They even say he's brought us here to kill us. These situations put them against God. They accuse God. Rather than using them as opportunities to draw closer to God.

And that's the solution, that's the alternative that the Bible puts forward. That actually God is not kind of precious or easily offended. God is someone who wants us to be real with him.

[11 : 18] To wrestle with him. To be authentic with him. To bring our problems to him. And so the Christian answer to grumbling is not, oh, just pretend it's fine.

Suck it up. But it's actually to bring these issues to a God who cares and to a God who provides. And so that's what we're going to look at now. We see, first of all, the people grumble.

And yet despite that, secondly, God provides. And again, we see this a number of times. The people complain about not being able to drink the water. Well, God provides a way for the water to be made drinkable.

And then not only that, he brings them to this place, Elim, with 12 springs of water, 70 palm trees. It's this kind of little paradise. And the idea is that God provides abundantly.

And then it's the same with the food. The people grumble about their hunger. And God provides this bread from heaven or manna, as the people call it. And it feeds them in the desert.

[12 : 19] It feeds them for 40 years, it says. And I just want us to think, I suppose, about a couple of things that are highlighted in this passage about this provision that God gives.

And number one is this, that this manna is given as a daily provision. Verse 4 of chapter 16, And the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day, that I may test them whether they will walk in my law or not.

God doesn't give them it all at once. He gives them it day by day by day. I don't know if you've ever been to Costco. The day my wife got a Costco card was just pips our wedding as kind of the happiest day of her life.

It's one of these shops where you can't buy anything in packs of less than a thousand. And you kind of leave and you have your own body weight in kind of flour and raisins and something like that.

And I'm always really confident that if there was a kind of a nuclear attack, at least they've got enough kind of dried fruit for the next three years. So we can just kind of hunker down and you're welcome around to ours if that happens.

[13 : 22] That's what Costco's like. And yet that is not how God provides for his people. That's not what happens with this manna, is it? No, instead, every day, each day, day by day, they're to go out.

Each day, every day, they're to collect enough for that day. One omer. It's about a tenth of an ether, it says at the end, which isn't massively helpful for us. Apparently it's about 22 liters.

And that's what would have fed them for the day. But they're not to take any more. And that's so often, I think, how God's provision works. God doesn't always give us this kind of road map all the way into the future.

He doesn't show us kind of how things are going to work out for the next ten years. He doesn't give us everything we need now so that we can just kind of store it away and forget about it and forget about him.

Why does he not do that? That would be great, wouldn't it, if we just had everything that we needed and we never had to think about that. Why does God give us this daily provision? Well, God says that in doing this way, it's going to be a test for the people.

[14 : 27] Will they continue to trust him day by day? And we see, don't we, people failed that test. They tried to cheat the system. And in verse 20, they saved some of this manna, but it goes off.

It stinks. It's full of worms. And the point is that God wants us to constantly remember our dependence on him. He knows what we're like.

But so often, the way that God works keeps us coming back to him with our needs and keeps us constantly being reminded that he's a God who provides, that he's a good God.

And that's what God is after with us, an ongoing relationship. God just doesn't want a kind of an annual general meeting where we meet him, we give him our demands, he gives us our stuff, and, you know, we'll see you next year.

He doesn't want a kind of a weekly catch-up or, you know, even a weekly catch-up at church. He wants a daily relationship with his people. And this is kind of God's pattern throughout the Bible.

[15 : 27] We see in the New Testament, Jesus, in the Lord's Prayer, teaches us to pray, give us this day our daily bread. That we're able to trust that God will provide for us today, each day.

So often, we're kind of moved to grumble, we're moved to uncertainty, because we want more than that. We want this thing sorted for next week, next month, next year, and yet God promises and provides what we need for today.

And we can trust him in that. And that keeps us coming back to him, recognizing time and time and time again our need to trust him. So it's a daily provision, that was number one.

Secondly, it's a provision that enables rest. Have a look down at verse 22 of chapter 16 there. It says, On the sixth day they gathered twice as much bread.

And Moses says to them, This is what the Lord has commanded. Tomorrow is a day of solemn rest, a holy Sabbath to the Lord. God provides for his people in a way that means they can have this rest, that they get this day of Sabbath, where they don't have to work.

[16 : 39] Instead, they're able to stop, and they're able to get true rest by focusing on God. In our world, we're so often busy, aren't we?

And I really recognize this in myself. My kind of default answer when people say, How was your week? I say, Well, it was busy. You know, often it was busy. But often we kind of use being busy as a symbol that, you know, we're worthwhile, we're doing stuff, we're important, we're valuable.

We kind of use busy as a kind of, yeah, trying to show that we're worth it. I think also that our kind of constant busyness is also a product of living in a world where everything moves so fast, where we're always contactable, where we're always exposed to different expectations of what we should be like.

This is what you should look like. This is what you should own. This is how much you should earn. This is the opportunities that your children should have. This is how your family should function. Countless things which kind of keep our nose to the grindstone.

Countless things that keep us busy trying to reach these standards that people pump out. And in the face of that, how incredible is it that there is a God who provides in such a way as to give us rest.

[17 : 57] A God who doesn't say, you know, like the world around us, you know, if you work hard enough, if you kind of work yourself into the ground, you might get something. But a God who says, look, here's a double portion so you can enjoy rest and spending time with me.

It's only as we turn away from grumbling and instead remember who God is, that he's the God who provides, that we're able to put our trust in him, that we're able to find this rest that his provision offers.

And I think that applies kind of directly in terms of just taking a day a week to rest and be with God. That's often what we, in the church, we call Sunday a Sabbath day, a day of rest to spend with God.

If we're too busy to ever do that, then that's probably a clear sign that we're relying on ourselves and our efforts rather than God. And yet also the kind of the Bible's picture of rest is much broader than that.

That God is able to offer us rest in all of life. God is able to offer a life that isn't just survival, which isn't just kind of the rat race, but a life that says by trusting in him and the way he provides for his people, there's true rest, an opportunity to enjoy God and a relationship with him.

[19 : 16] And again, this is the big picture of the Bible. This is what Jesus tells us in the New Testament, the part of the Bible after Jesus has been born. We read these verses at the start of our service.

Jesus, come to me and I will give you rest, Jesus says. The Christian life isn't about kind of proving ourselves or earning our worth, about work, work, work. It's about trusting in Jesus and about resting in him.

And in fact, this whole passage really is about Jesus, finds its fulfillment in Jesus. He is ultimately how God has provided for us. Again, if we fast forward into the New Testament, there's a place in a book called John's Gospel.

It records the life of Jesus and the people are questioning Jesus. They're kind of badgering him. You know, who are you? Prove yourself. Why should we listen to you? And they say, you know, back in Moses' day, he gave our ancestors manna to eat in the wilderness, bread from heaven.

And they kind of say that not just as a fact, but kind of as an accusation or a challenge. Jesus, what are you going to do? How can you compare to that? And Jesus' response is incredible.

[20 : 29] He says this, I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. An incredible answer.

It's an answer that really confuses the people who are listening. Perhaps it sounds confusing to us now as we hear that. What's he talking about? How can Jesus be bread? What Jesus is saying is this.

He doesn't say, okay, I'll give you this. I'll give you that. Jesus says, I am the gift. Jesus says, I am this ultimate provision from God.

I am the way in which God provides for his people. And the point is this, that God provides for us in a far bigger way than simply looking after our material needs.

God has got a far bigger picture of rest than simply keeping us fed and watered, although he cares about those details as well. But through Jesus, the bread of life, God has provided a way for us to be brought back to him.

[21 : 33] God has provided a way for us to have a relationship with him. Jesus goes on to say that while the people who ate the manna in the wilderness, eventually they died, each one of them.

He goes on to say that whoever feeds on him, that means whoever trusts in him, whoever trusts him as God's provision will live forever. God provides for us our ultimate need.

He finds us as people who are lost, who are separated from him, who are heading toward eternal death away from him. And he provides Jesus, the bread of life, who finds us, who brings us back into relationship with him and offers this eternal life.

And that is what God provides for us if we put our trust in him. And just like the Israelites, this isn't something that we've earned or deserve. We spoke about how the Israelites grumble.

We saw how at basically every stage they failed the test. They didn't follow what God commanded and yet still God provided. And this provision of Jesus, come to save us. This rescue isn't something that we earn or deserve.

[22 : 43] But it's a gift purely from God's grace, a gift to faithless, grumbling people like us. And yet while we do continue to grumble, recognizing this gift is also the antidote.

It's the answer to our grumbling. If we want to be these people who are able to stand distinct from the world around us by not being quick to complain and gripe and grumble, well, the key is to remember what the Israelites kept forgetting, what we so quickly forget.

The goodness of God, the rescue of God. And it says we look to Jesus, the bread of heaven, and we see God's provision for us that means whatever situation we face in life, real life, real challenges, real difficulties, that in the face of those we're able to come to God, not accusing, not blaming, not complaining, not grumbling, but rather coming in trust, knowing that he is a God who loves and provides, a God who has provided and a God who continues to provide, who's done that through Jesus, who will never let us down now or any time into the future if we put our trust in him, if we find our rest in him, Jesus Christ, the bread of heaven, God's provision for us.

Let's pray. Let's pray.