

Exodus 15:22-17:7

The God of the Stomach

Philippians 3:18 – Paul talks about a group of people of whom he says ‘their God is their stomach’.

I’ve always wondered what this means.

Recently I’ve come to understand at least a bit of what it means.

I’ve come to understand through looking at bookstores and the magazine racks at newsagents.

I want you to remember the last time you went to a newsagent.

My newsagent has some little signs that divide up the main sections of magazines.

Some of the sections are...

- Home
- Garden
- Car
- Motorbike
- Computers
- Internet
- Men’s Issues
- Food
- Women’s Issues
- Decorating
- Etc.

Now you need to understand that publishing a good quality magazine is a very difficult and expensive endeavour.

To succeed you need to tap into a ready market.

You need to produce a magazine that interests people.

You need to produce articles that touch issues that affect large numbers of people and that large numbers of people wish to be informed about.

For this reason, magazines are a good indicator of what interests our society.

They are good indicator of the things that are of importance to the people we live and work with.

Now if this is the case, what are the main interests of people in our society?

What are the things they focus on?

What are the things they want to know more about?

What are the things that make life interesting and worthwhile for them?

When you look at the magazine racks at the local newsagent, surely the answer cries out with clarity.

People are interested in very tangible things.

In very material things.

In things that they can consume.

In things that they can eat and drink and ride and play and make and wear.

In things that are very earthy.

The focus of us as humans in this world is on the very tangible.

These are the things that are our gods.

The things we give our attention to.

And this is at least part of what Paul means when he talks about the stomach being a god.

He means that the gods of the people of our world are so often the things you can see, touch, taste, eat, drink, ride, play, and wear.

Now there is another side to all of this, isn't there?

After all, some of the things our world worships are also the things we can't do without.

We can't do without food.

We can't do without things to drink.

We can't do without clothes.

And we can't do without a place to shelter from the elements.

It's not that we worship these things.

We need them to exist.

It is this tension that I want to talk about tonight as we look at Exodus 15:22-17:7.

You see, I think this passage raises some of these issues and helps us find some answers to how we should live rightly before God in relation to these issues.

Let's have a look at these passages.

Exodus 15:22-17:7

Where we've been so far

God's Saving Act – Deliverance out of distress in Egypt (Exodus 1-14)

The Distress (Exodus 1-11)

- Oppression in Egypt (Ex 1)
- The call and commission of Moses (Ex 2-6)
- God's promise (Ex 3)
- Moses and Pharaoh and the Plagues (Ex 7-11)

The Deliverance (Exodus 12-14)

- The Passover and departure from Egypt (12:1-13:16)
- March through the wilderness; Pursuit and deliverance at the sea (13:17-14:31)

Human Response – Praise (Exodus 15)

- The Hymn of Praise (15:1-21)

An overview of the next two sections

God's Act – Preservation (Exodus 15:22-18:27)

God meets elementary needs of human existence

Thirst (Exodus 15:22-27; 17:1-7)

- God supplies water

Hunger (Exodus 16)

- God supplies manna and quail

Despair (Exodus 17:8-18:27)

- Because of the Amalekites: God supplies victory (17:8-16)
- Because of domestic problems: God supplies Jethro and the judges (18)

The problem of water

- Incident 1: Exodus 15:22-27

With Exodus 15 we enter into the first record of Israel wandering in the desert.

This is the first wilderness wandering story.

This story will take us from the edge of the Red Sea to Mount Sinai in Exodus 19.

After Mount Sinai they will wander again in the wilderness for 40 years until they cross over the Jordan River and into the promised land.

This first story, in Exodus 15:22-27 is brief.

Nevertheless, it sets the pattern for the stories that follow:

- A problem arises
- The people complain
- Moses intervenes
- God responds with deliverance

This story also has another element that is present in each of the other stories.

In each story there is an echo of the plagues in Egypt.

In Exodus 7:24 we are told that the result of the first plague was that the Egyptians could not drink the water.

In Exodus 15:23 we are told that this is what happens to the Israelites in the wilderness.

However, with the Israelites God turns the bitter water to sweet (verse 25).

What's more, he brings them to an Eden-like oasis where there are twelve springs for the twelve tribes and palm trees in abundance (verse 27).

This first story however, has one element that is different to the others.

It has verse 26 which lays out right from the beginning how the Israelites are to shape their daily lives.

They are not to expect that life is just about food and water.

Human existence is not about bread and water alone.

It is about living by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

It is about listening carefully to the voice of the Lord their God and doing what is right in his eyes.

This is true life, true existence.

This is where the focus of life is to be found – on God and his word.

To these people God will look – to those who love his word and tremble at it.

And these incidents in the wilderness will test the metal of his people in this respect.

God will use these incidents to push and probe and to see if they will indeed live in dependence upon him.

Will they make God their God?

Or will they make their god their stomachs.

- Incident 2: Exodus 17:1-7

The second incident with water occurs in Exodus 17:1-7.

It follows the same pattern as the earlier incident.

- A problem arises
- The people complain
- Moses intervenes
- God responds with deliverance

There is another echo of the plague stories.

In the plague stories, the staff of Moses was very important.

For example, it was with his staff that Moses touched the Nile and made all the water unfit to drink.

However, here he uses his staff very differently.

Here his staff is used to strike a rock and bring forth water to drink.

The problem of food

By the time we get to Exodus 16:1, forty-five days have passed.

Complaints begin again in earnest.

The Israelites as a congregation state to Moses that they wished they had stayed where they were.

They have quickly forgotten the things they groaned to God about in Egypt.

Now Egypt looks welcoming and food looks welcoming.

This wilderness looks barren.

God responds.

There is no anger.

Instead, he acts with grace and mercy.

And his acts are again full of echoes of the plague stories.

In Egypt during the seventh plague, God had 'rained' hail upon Egypt and thereby destroyed their food sources (9:18, 23).

Now he 'rains' bread from the heavens (16:4).

In the eighth plague in Egypt, locusts had 'come up' and 'covered' the land (10:14-15) destroying plants and fruit trees.

Now, quails 'come up' and 'cover' the camp, providing food.

The destruction of the plague stories is reversed.

God acts as the creator again.

He creates life and blessing instead of the curse.

He acts according to his favoured course of action.

Food abounds in the wilderness.

Verses 6-10 give us an insight into what is going on here.

Take a look at them [Read them].

Can you see what is happening here?

Notice who the complaint is directed towards.

It is directed towards their human leaders.

God is neglected.

And so Moses makes the point that God's provision of food will hopefully direct them back towards God.

Hopefully they will see that it is the Lord to whom they should look.

It is the Lord who has delivered them.

It is the Lord who can supply their daily needs.

A massive letdown

The thing that staggers me about these stories is the attitude of the Israelites so soon after God's great deliverance.

It is a massive letdown.

God performs this massive rescue.

He delivers them out of Egypt in a way that no other God has.

He does it with great signs and wonders.

With miracles that stagger the imagination.

And yet within the space of a few days or weeks of this deliverance the Israelites are whingeing to God.

They grumble and complain.

They say they want to return to Egypt.

They say that things were better in Egypt.

There they had pots of meat and could eat all they wanted.

They had cried out to God inviting him to rescue them.

He had heard their cry and remember his covenant with them.

He had rescued them.

And all they can do is grumble and complain.

It is clear that their allegiance to God is very fickle.

Their allegiance to their stomachs is very strong.

In fact, it almost seems as though their God is their stomach.

However, I'm not sure that the focus of this story should be the grumbling and complaining of the Israelites.

I think that would be to miss the main point.

The main point of this story is God's great grace, isn't it.

He is the same God as the God who rescued them out of Egypt.

He is the Lord, the gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

He is the God who lovingly and patiently leads them by the hand and gives them more than they ask for.

They ask for water and he gives them paradise in the wilderness.

They ask for food and he gives them sweet bread and tasty quail.

He is like a lover with an ungrateful and unresponsive partner.

He woos them, cajoles them, and speaks tenderly to them.

Later we will see God respond in judgment.

But not here.

Here he is the lover.

Reflections from the rest of the Bible

The theme of the desert is one that comes up time and time again in the rest of the Bible.

Some passages regard it as a positive time.

For example, Deuteronomy 1:31; Hosea 2:14; Nehemiah 9:21.

In these passages, the wilderness is a time when God came to the aid of his people.

Where he wooed them and escorted them to Canaan.

These passages record the wilderness as a time of God's special care and provision for his people.

Here God was a lover towards Israel.

In the latter parts of the Old Testament this element is picked up again.

The prophets that speak to the Israelites in Babylon begin to talk about a new wilderness journey where God will again care for and provide for his people (Isaiah 40).

God will be a shepherd who tenderly cares for his flock.

However, other Old Testament passages are not so positive.

The book of Numbers is not so positive.

It tells about a later time when Israel again complains about food.

And this time God has had enough of their whingeing.

He has been supplying them graciously with food for well over two years and they are still complaining.

And so, in Numbers, God punishes them.

In other words, the wilderness wanderings elsewhere in the Bible are often used to talk about the hard-heartedness of God's people.

Pharaoh is not the only one who has a hard heart.

So do the people of God.

Take a look at Psalm 78:15-21 as an example.

Let's read Psalm 106:14.

This two-sidedness of the wilderness wanderings are picked up in the New Testament as well.

John 6 tells us about Jesus as the bread of life, supplying the spiritual needs of God's people.

However, at the same time, he is putting his people to the test.

Will they look past physical bread.

Will they look instead to him, the living Word of God and live by his word.

And they refuse.

They grumble (6:41-43).

And they complain that this is a hard word.

A chapter later Jesus tells them that if they come to him they will never thirst again.

In him, God will supply an antidote for their greatest need.

But again they refuse.

Other passages in the New Testament focus on the negative side of the wilderness wanderings.

Take a look at 1 Corinthians 10:5-11 with me.

Now take a look at Hebrews 3:7-4:11

Thinking about us

As individuals

So, what does this passage have to say to us?

I think it has two messages – one is for us as individuals and the other is for us as members of God's people.

Let's talk first about us as individuals.

You see, we live in a world where we are bombarded by the temptation to gauge life by our stomachs, by how full we are.

This can be in terms of food, wealth, relationships, clothing, housing, and assorted other issues that reflect our material or temporal state.

There is a constant call to us to measure our existence by whether our longings for such things are met and met quickly or not.

These are what we need for real existence and we deserve them.

However, the great news about Jesus ought to train us differently.

For in the gospel we hear that God has met our greatest need.

He has seen our need for rescue from sin and death, from the world and the devil.

He has sent his Son into the world to die for us and to bring us to him.

We now know that what matters in life is not the things you can see and touch.

What matters is not the visible and temporary but the invisible and eternal.

These are the things that last.

But my experience is that this reality does not stick very long with Christians.

You see, we look at the Israelites and feel let down that after such a great salvation they could so easily and so quickly forget.

But we have an even greater salvation.

We have not been rescued from a physically dire situation.

We have been rescued from a spiritually dire situation.

And the blood that was shed for us was not the blood of a literal lamb.

No, the blood that was shed for us was that of the eternal Son of God, the true Lamb of God.

And yet grumbling so often becomes us, doesn't it.

We still incessantly ask God, 'What shall we eat? What shall we drink? With what shall we clothe ourselves?'

We are not content in whatever circumstances God brings to us.

We too forget.

We too grumble.

We too are whingers and complainers.

Not living by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

No.

Instead, we wish to live by every good things that proceeds from the turnstiles and our shopping malls.

And God is an ogre who denies us everything, instead of being the lover who would give us everything we need.

And so, we fail the test that God parades before us.

Please understand what I'm saying.

My view is that the Isrealites are not the only ones being put to the test.

As we live our lives in this materialist and rich country of Australia, God is testing us to see who our God is.

Is he the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Or is he our stomachs.

Will you trust the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ?

Will you rely on him to give you what is best?

Will you come to him as the Father who gives generously to his children?

As God's people (1 Corinthians 10; Hebrews 2-3)

However, I have one other word to say today.

This word comes from 1 Corinthians 10 and Hebrews 2-3.

You see, 1 Corinthians 10 tells us that we live in a world not unlike the world the Israelites lived in.

It is a world where temptation abounds and there is always the danger that we will turn away from depending on God and his word about Jesus.

It is to this situation that Hebrews has something to say.

Let's have a look at Hebrews 3:1ff together.

Therefore, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess. ² He was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses was faithful in all God's house. ³ Jesus has been found worthy of greater honor than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honor than the house itself. ⁴ For every house is built by someone, but God is the builder of everything. ⁵ Moses was faithful as a servant in all God's house, testifying to what would be said in the future. ⁶ But Christ is faithful as a son over God's house. And we are his house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast.

⁷ So, as the Holy Spirit says:

*"Today, if you hear his voice,
⁸ do not harden your hearts
as you did in the rebellion,
during the time of testing in the desert,
⁹ where your fathers tested and tried me
and for forty years saw what I did.
¹⁰ That is why I was angry with that generation,
and I said, 'Their hearts are always going astray,
and they have not known my ways.'
¹¹ So I declared on oath in my anger,
'They shall never enter my rest.'"*

¹² See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. ¹³ But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. ¹⁴ We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first. ¹⁵ As has just been said:

“Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts
as you did in the rebellion.”

¹⁶ Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? ¹⁷ And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the desert? ¹⁸ And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed? ¹⁹ So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief. Notice what the writer urges us to do – to encourage each other to keep our focus on God. Let's make this our focus as a congregation.