

The Giver

by Scott Grant

Two biggies

Two great concerns loom ever large in the mind's catalogue of things to worry about: today and tomorrow. The present and the future. What else is there to worry about, really? The present and the future were of great concern to the Israelites as they set out into the wilderness. They worried that the food they had for today wouldn't be enough, and they worried that there wouldn't be any food tomorrow. They spent plenty of time complaining about their plight in the wilderness. But even when they complained about the Lord, the Lord still provided for them. Even when we complain about him, the Lord gives us what we need tomorrow, and what he gives us today is enough.

In Exodus 15:22-27, the Israelites, fresh from crossing the Red Sea, set out into the wilderness and complained to Moses because they could find no water. The Lord, however, provided water for them at Marah and at Elim. Despite the Lord's provision, the people are still in a grumbling mood.

The Lord wants to give (16:1-12)

The Israelites venture out into the wilderness of Sin (which is related linguistically to the word "Sinai" and carries no connotations connected with the English word "sin"), which is between Elim and Sinai. Elim is an oasis, bubbling with springs of water and flourishing with palm trees. The Israelites were refreshed there. Sinai is where they will meet the Lord, enter into a covenant relationship with him and receive revelation. At Elim and Sinai, the Lord shows up in their lives in powerful ways. But now they're in the wilderness between Elim and Sinai, which raises the question: Does the Lord give us anything for the daily grind, for the day-to-day existence between Elim and Sinai?

The Israelites have an answer to that question that goes something like this: "No, the Lord is not providing for us, and he will not provide for us." They grumble against their leaders, Moses and Aaron. The word "grumble," in either noun or verbal forms, appears nine times in 16:1-12. As Moses points out, their complaint against their leaders represents a complaint against the Lord, for the Lord in his sovereignty gave the leaders to the people.

Verse 3 represents a tragic misconception of God. The people wish that they would have died by the Lord's "hand" in Egypt. But there are nine references in the first 15 chapters of Exodus to the Lord's "hand" rescuing them from Egypt. Exodus 13:14: "With a powerful hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery." The Lord here is not seen as the helper, redeemer or giver that he is but as a killer.

How do we picture the Lord? The flesh in us would picture him in a way similar to that of the Israelites, as someone who is out to get us. These are the pictures that our flesh flashes into our minds. And when we believe these pictures, we see the hand that would help us as the hand that would kill us. This is a tragic misconception.

The people embellish their memories of Egypt, where they supposedly sat by pots of meat and filled their bellies with bread. The best they are hoping for is a dream about dying fat in some glorified version of the past. Is this the best the Lord can do? Is this our God?

The Lord promises bread from heaven - enough for each day and twice as much on the sixth day. The word

for bread, which can also mean food, is the same word used in 16:3 in reference to the bread the Israelites remembered eating in Egypt. As they had enough to eat in Egypt, so they will have enough to eat in the wilderness.

In the evening, after partaking of a day's worth of the Lord's provisions, the people will be able to acknowledge the Lord. Specifically, they will "know that the Lord has brought you out of the land of Egypt." Earlier, they thought it was Moses and Aaron who brought them out of Egypt and that they did so with an evil purpose - to kill them (16:3). Now, after seeing the Lord provide for them, they will see that it is the Lord, not Moses and Aaron, who brought them out of Egypt, and that the Lord did so not to kill them but to give to them. How skewed our thinking about God can be!

The people's grumbling is contrasted with the Lord's giving. The people's grumbling, amazingly, is met by the Lord's giving. In the face of our complaining, the Lord gives. This is pure grace.

The key word in verses 7, 8 and 9 is the conjunction "for," which appears in all three verses. The conjunction in each case is connected to the people's grumbling. In the first two cases, God does something, "for," or because, he has heard the people grumble, and in the last case the people are instructed to do something, "for," or because, the Lord has heard the complaining.

In the morning they will see the glory of the Lord, because the Lord has heard their complaining. Is this good news or bad news? One would think that if they are to see the glory of the Lord because of their grumbings, then the Lord would show up to punish them. But this is not the case. This turns out to be a positive revelation of the Lord that is connected with the giving of food in the morning. Amazing.

The Lord will give them meat and bread, because he has heard their complaining. One would think that if the Lord has heard their complaining, he'd withhold meat and bread, not give it.

Finally, the people are instructed to come near the Lord, because he has heard their complaining. One would think that if the people were called to come near because of their complaints that the Lord would be intent on punishing them. But what happens?

The glory of the Lord appears. The people must be thinking: "Now we're going to get it. We've been complaining against the Lord, and he's shown up to blast us." The Lord speaks to Moses. The suspense is drawn out. The people must be thinking: "The Lord must be instructing Moses to blast us." The first words out of the Lord's mouth are, "I have heard the grumbings of the sons of Israel." The people must be thinking: "Yep, here it comes. We're gonna die!"

Here it is, here's what the Lord tells them he's going to do because of their grumbling against him: "At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread." "What?! He's not going to kill us? He's going to ... to ... feed us?!" Not only is the Lord going to feed them, he's going to give them meat, a real treat, and they will be "filled" with bread. The Lord not only doesn't kill them, he gives them the best food, and he gives an abundance.

What's the result of this amazing scenario? The people "shall know that I am the Lord your God." This is a familiar refrain throughout the book of Exodus, in which the Lord reveals himself to his people, and even to the Egyptians. The Lord wants to be known. And how is he known? They will know that he is the Lord in connection with his gracious and abundant provision in the face of their complaining.

This is completely different from their conception of the Lord. How different is it from our conception of the Lord? The Lord is not a killer but a giver, and when he is castigated and spurned, he's still a giver. The Lord calls himself "the Lord your God." The people have complained against him, but he hasn't stopped being their God.

This is their God, and this is your God, if you believe in Jesus Christ. This God doesn't just give, he doesn't just give the best stuff, he doesn't just give abundantly, he doesn't just give the best stuff abundantly, he doesn't just give the best stuff abundantly even when people complain about him, he gives the best stuff

abundantly to you even when you complain about him. He is the Lord your God. Does this in any way change our conception of the Lord?

There is a beautiful scene near the end of "The Agony and the Ecstasy," Irving Stone's historical novel about Michelangelo. An ailing Pope Julius II visits the nearly completed ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Michelangelo has to help him up the last few rungs of the ladder. He looks above him at Michelangelo's depiction of God, about to impart the gift of life to Adam. The pope had fought many wars in the name of the church. He has blood on his hands, and he isn't even sure if his cause had been successful. But as he looks at Michelangelo's picture of God, a smile comes to his cracked lips.

"Do you truly believe God is that benign?" the pope asks the artist.

Michelangelo: "Yes, Holy Father."

Pope Julius: "I most ardently hope so, since I am going to be standing before him before long. If he is as you have painted him, then I shall be forgiven my sins."

In Michelangelo's painting, the pope saw a different image of God, unlike the one he had lived with his whole life. This God wasn't killing life; he was giving life. This God was a giver, even in the face of his sins. Our God is a giver, even in the face of our complaints against him.

What, precisely, does the Lord give? First, he gives what we need for tomorrow.

The Lord will give tomorrow (16:13-21)

The Lord provides food, a flake-like substance in the morning and quail in the evening. The people don't know what the flake-like substance is and ask, "What is it?" Moses answers, "It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat." They were scrutinizing the gift, but they didn't know it was a gift. It's difficult for us to recognize, let alone appreciate, a gift from the Lord when we don't view him as a giver of gifts.

The flake-like substance, later to be called manna, was to be gathered each day but not saved until the next day. The people need to understand that the Lord is a giver. Their conception of him needs to be changed. What better way than to see him provide for them each morning? The Lord is teaching them to depend on his provision. Included in Jesus' example of prayer may be an allusion to the daily provision of manna: "Give us this day our daily bread" (Matthew 6:11).

Some, however, disobeyed the command and saved some manna. Why? Because they're afraid there won't be any tomorrow. "The Lord may be giving now," they must reason, "but he might not give tomorrow." The Lord promised that he would give tomorrow, but they don't believe him. So they sin: They don't believe the Lord.

So they take the Lord's good gift and they hoard it; they turn a gift into a possession. In making it a possession, they squeeze the giver right out of the gift. All they are left with is a gift they no longer think of as a gift but as something deserved. When a gift becomes a possession, it is no longer satisfying, so it easily becomes an irrational obsession that would supposedly be satisfying if enough of it could be obtained and maintained. These folks are obsessed with having enough food for tomorrow, so they gather extra.

But worms eat away at it, and it becomes foul. It is inedible. Their strategy for success backfires, as do all strategies that fly in the face of the Lord's commands.

The Lord will give us what we need tomorrow. That means we don't have to worry about it. Listen to the words of Jesus: "Do not be anxious then, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'With what shall we clothe ourselves?' For all these things the Gentiles eagerly seek, for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. Therefore do not be anxious for tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own" (Matthew 6:31-34).

Our heavenly Father knows what we need. "But the very hairs on your head are all numbered" (Matthew 10:30). We may not know what we need, but he does. And if we need it tomorrow, he'll give it tomorrow.

The Lord not only gives what we need for tomorrow, what he gives today is enough.

What the Lord gives today is enough (16:22-30)

On the sixth day, the people gather twice as much manna so that they can eat on the seventh day without working, as per the instructions of the Lord. Unlike when the people gathered extra manna in disobedience, the extra manna doesn't spoil. So there is plenty of food on the seventh day. But some went out looking for manna on the seventh day anyway. Why? Because they're greedy. They don't think enough is enough. They want more than enough.

Unlike those who disobeyed previously, these people, who may in fact be the same people, aren't storing up for tomorrow; they simply want more today. When they saved it, they didn't think the Lord would provide at all for tomorrow. When they looked for it on the seventh day, they didn't think the Lord provided enough for today. Again, they're squeezing the giver out of the gift and turning the gift into a possession and an obsession.

What happens to these folks, who don't believe the Lord is a giver and who go looking for what they think they need? They find nothing. The search is futile. All they do is waste time and energy. Obsessiveness is like that: It has a voracious appetite; it wastes time and energy in search of satisfaction, and it is never satisfied.

The Lord asks the people through Moses, "How long do you (plural) refuse to keep my commandments and my instructions?" What commands have they refused to keep? First, they saved the manna for the next day; second, they searched for it on the seventh day. In each case, they were commanded to do essentially nothing. Don't do anything. Trust the Lord.

Moses tells the people that the Lord has "given" them the seventh day, or the sabbath. Again, it is a gift they don't recognize as a gift. This day, in which they don't do anything, is a gift from the Lord. They were given two days' worth of manna precisely so that they could enjoy the gift of the Lord's rest on the seventh day.

The Lord tells them to "remain," a word that can also be translated "sit." They are simply called to sit. How difficult it is to sit and not do anything!

Well, there is one thing they can do. The seventh day is called the sabbath, which is taken from the verb translated "rest." It is a "sabbath to the Lord" (16:25). The concept of the Sabbath is more fully explained elsewhere in the Pentateuch, but it is here in embryonic form: The sabbath is "to" or "for" the Lord. What does this mean? The Lord explains it more fully in Exodus 31:13: "You shall surely observe my sabbaths; for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the Lord who sanctifies you." The people are to rest not simply for the purpose of doing nothing but in order to acknowledge God's work.

The Lord works to give us what we need. And if we recognize this, we'll worship him, and we'll see the gifts as gifts and not possessions and obsessions. The gifts, then, lead us to worship the giver.

So that's what the sabbath does for us. The temporary letter of the sabbath law has been done away with (Colossians 2:16), but the spirit of, or reason for, the sabbath is still valid (Hebrews 4:7-11). So it behooves us to cultivate a sabbath lifestyle, which involves periodically resting from our work to recognize that the Lord works to give us what we need. And as we do that, we are less prone to meet our own supposed needs outside his will. The sabbath, then, far from depriving us of the opportunity to "do" something to meet our needs, gives us the opportunity to recognize that our needs have been met and will be met by the Lord. And therefore, and more importantly, it gives us the opportunity to worship the Lord. So on the seventh day, the people "rested."

The Lord will give us what we need tomorrow, and what he gives us today is enough.

Jim and Elisabeth Elliot, missionaries in Central America in the early 1950s, were in love for more than five years before being married, and neither of them could explain precisely why they waited other than that God had not yet led them to be married. It was excruciating. Jim wrote to Elisabeth: "Oh what an ache wanting you can bring, when I knew the wanting itself is good, right, even God-granted, but realize that now it is wisely God-denied, and that he has not let me know all the wisdom of the denial." They wanted desperately to be married to each other, yet they waited, because they believed God was telling them to wait. But doesn't God give good gifts, doesn't he give us what we need?

Listen to Jim's conclusion, in another letter to Elisabeth: "Is it not, for all its sting, a wonderful way to live, Betty? To dream, and want and pray, almost savagely; then to commit and wait and see him quietly pile all dreams aside and replace them with what we could not dream, the *realized* Will?" Those "savage" desires could have led Jim to seize something outside God's will, to possess something, to obsess over it, but he was a man who knew that the Lord would give him what he needed tomorrow and that what he gave him today was enough.

Not only does a sabbath lifestyle help us recognize that the Lord is a giver but a lifestyle of memorializing his gifts does so as well.

Memorializing the Lord's gifts (16:31-36)

The people call the flake-like substance "manna," which is related to the Hebrew word for "what." They called it manna because they asked the question, "What is it?" (16:15). And it tasted sweet, just like all God's gifts taste.

The people are commanded to place some manna in a jar so that the generations may "see the bread that I fed you in the wilderness." The manna is to be saved in order to memorialize the Lord's provision. It will serve as a tangible reminder of the Lord's faithfulness. It will commemorate the Lord as giver.

How can we do this? Perhaps there are tangible reminders of the Lord's faithfulness that are worth saving that will help us remember the Lord as giver: a letter of encouragement from a friend, a small item that was part of a significant event, a scripture verse that ministered to us at a crucial time.

I write. I write thoughts, prayers, laments. Recently, in the process of moving, I came across something I had written 10 years ago. I was wrestling then with something I am wrestling with now, but I was able to see that I was wrestling with it in a more mature way today than 10 years ago. What I had written 10 years ago served as a reminder of God's faithfulness - how he has been faithful in the last 10 years not to remove the problem but to build faith into me.

This goes hand in hand with the sabbath. In the sabbath, we rest to recognize the Lord's work. In memorializing his work, we lay the groundwork for recognizing the Lord's work in the future.

The Lord gives

Even when we complain about him, the Lord gives us what we need. He gives us what we need tomorrow, and what he gives us today is enough. Resting from our work and memorializing the Lord's gifts to recognize him as giver leads us into worship and away from obsession.