Starving to Death (Exod. 16)?

Questions and Suggestions for Discussion

Wilderness Times

1. Other places and other times may be fine, ‘but here and now is awful’, says Walter Moberly of the Israelites’ wilderness experience, while adding that the wilderness is a place where many lessons can be learned. Barbara Brown Taylor, thinking perhaps of similar benefits, speaks of learning the ‘holy art of being lost’.

   • Can you think of any wilderness times in your life? Perhaps that’s even where you’re finding yourself at present. How have you experienced those times? What are the specific challenges of living in the wilderness?
   • What do you make of the ‘holy art of being lost’? Is it important to learn that art? What, in practical terms, might it mean to learn it? What does the wilderness teach us? How can we survive in the wilderness?
   • During their time in the wilderness, the Israelites had to rely on manna, on something that was strange and unfamiliar and perhaps experienced as less than ideal. What does that teach us about our own lives? Can you think of times when you had to make do with the strange, the unfamiliar, that which was less than ideal? How did you cope? Is there any value in those kinds of experiences? What might it be?

Hoarding Manna

2. Our story makes the point that hoarding manna is unnecessary and achieves nothing. Everyone had exactly what they needed, and no-one could add anything by hoarding.

   • Do you believe this is how life works? Can these principles be applied to us today? If so, how would you apply them? What, in your opinion, counts as unhelpful hoarding? What’s permissible?
   • How, in that context, do you understand Jesus’ prayer ‘give us today our daily bread’ (Matt. 6:11)? Why did Jesus suggest that this is how we ought to pray? What does this mean for how we pray, for how we relate to God, for how we live our life?
   • Fretheim comments that ‘the increasing gap between rich and poor in modern societies is certainly in part due to the hoarding of manna. It witnesses to a failure to recognize that all we have is due to God’s goodness, not our ability to gather manna better than anyone else’. What do you make of this? What can we do about it?
Sabbath Rest

3. Sabbath observance, i.e. resting from our labour and making it possible for others to do the same, is of paramount importance in the book of Exodus and indeed in the Old Testament generally, being linked to God’s creation purposes and included in the Ten Commandments. Our story in Exodus 16 additionally makes the point that work on the Sabbath is not only not necessary but in fact fruitless.

- What does it mean for the Sabbath to be holy? Does that still apply to us today in any way?
- Is the Sabbath commandment less important than the others? Does it matter whether we rest or not? Shouldn’t it be up to us to decide? When you think about this, resist the temptation to restrict your reflections to your own life. Bear in mind that our decisions regarding work and rest may well have implications for those around us.
- Fretheim comments that the Sabbath ‘is presented to the people ..., not as a day of worship, but as a day of solemn rest’. What do you make of this? Is there any value in such a perspective, for instance, in relation to our society today? What does this perspective say about God?
- Rather than being judgemental about our society’s ways and life-style, how might we present Sabbath rest as something that’s truly attractive? What might such rest look like? How, in very practical terms, can we turn Sabbath rest into a truly life-giving and refreshing experience? Bear in mind Jesus’ insistence that the Sabbath has been created for us, not we for the Sabbath.

Finding God in the Natural and the Everyday

4. Fretheim highlights the naturalness of God’s gifts, stressing that it’s important that we learn to find God in the natural and the everyday because otherwise, if we struggle to discern the miraculous in our life, we may be in danger of experiencing God as absent.

- Do you agree with Fretheim that it’s important for us to learn to experience God in the natural and the everyday?
- Do you share his concern that we may otherwise be in danger of experiencing God as absent?
- What does it mean for you to experience God in the natural and the everyday?
- Might this be an aspect of your spiritual life that could be developed further? How might you go about that?