



Stewardship in the First Testament

Lesson 3: Abundance for All

Overview

This lesson explores God’s provision of “enough” for all and the communal ethic of sharing, hospitality, and care for the vulnerable. Participants will reflect on how practices like manna, daily bread, and hospitality shape a vision of abundance and collective well-being.

Preparation for the Teacher

- Read Exodus 16:2–30 and Genesis 18:1–8 ahead of time.
- Watch the video—it may stimulate additional questions appropriate for your context.
- Do a little homework: think of a few examples of communities pulling together to face a crisis. Think of a time or two when helping someone who needed help wound up blessing the whole community.

Background

The Bible’s second story about the origin of sabbath observance is centered around God’s miraculous provision of food for Israel when they flee into the desert to escape the Egyptian army. They finally are free, but the people panic. They are afraid they will starve. They turn on their leader Moses. Freedom, they fear, is not all it is cracked up to be. There is a certain predictability and comfort to being enslaved. And the people now liberated are worried, terrified by the insecurity of freedom.

God responds to their complaint by providing “manna,” a bread-like substance that could not be stored overnight. So it did no good to hoard it. The curious thing about this manna, however, was that on the sixth day of every week, it could be stored for one additional day. This allowed Israel to gather a double portion on the sixth day so they would not have to gather manna on the seventh day, which God declared to be a day of rest, sabbath.

Manna had one other strange feature: when people of different abilities and strengths harvested the manna and took it home to eat, they discovered that everybody had exactly the amount of food they needed. Those who gathered more had no surplus. Those who gathered less had no shortfall. In a community shaped by sabbath, God provides enough for all, regardless of ability.

The ethical vision of this story is consistent with ethics that grow out of household-based economies like that of ancient Israel. In the ancient household, every member works for the long-

term survival and well-being of the family. And households within a given region are morally obligated to ensure that vulnerable families survive.

This moral obligation is expressed in a variety of ways in the Bible, for example, through the tradition of gleaning that requires families to leave a portion of the crop at harvest time so poor and vulnerable families can gather the rest for themselves. There are strict regulations on lending. Creditors are limited in the kinds of collateral they can demand. They are prohibited from charging interest on subsistence loans, that is, loans that people take out to feed, clothe, and shelter their families. Creditors are regulated in the way they treat people who take out loans. They can collect their money, but they must respect the basic human dignity of their debtors.

Finally, families have the responsibility to provide hospitality—food, shelter, and protection—to travelers and to immigrants who temporarily come into the neighborhood because of economic hardship, natural disaster, or war. In all of these cases, the moral obligation to provide assistance is grounded in the conviction that we are stronger together than we are divided against one another—even when the “other” is not one of our ethnic or national group. When we share, we succeed. In community, we thrive.

Pray for your students as you prepare this week’s lesson.

Facilitating the Lesson

As the class begins, welcome the class and engage in your usual opening exercises (taking attendance, collecting an offering, prayer concerns, other announcements, etc.).

Opening Activity

Have the class watch the following videos:

- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pd8V3Euctxg>
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oYAz81xT9oU>

Scripture Reflection

Read the following texts aloud as part of the discussion:

- Exodus 16:13–21
- Matthew 6:9–11
- Genesis 18:1–8

Discussion Questions

Invite the class to wrestle with the following:

1. Daily Provision

In today's story, God provides food for Israel, but that food cannot be hoarded. If you try to store it for later, it rots. In fact, no matter how much anyone is able to gather, everyone winds up having exactly what they need to get by today.

- What are some ways God has provided exactly what you, your family, or your church needs?
- How, if at all, have you been able to use that to help meet the needs of others?

2. Enough for All

- What difference would it make if we assumed that God wants everyone to have what they need?
- How would that affect how we spend our money?
- How might that affect the policies our government pursues?
- Should this biblical vision have an impact on our political and economic decisions? How so? How not?

3. Daily Bread

What do you think Jesus means when he prays: "give us this day our daily bread"?

- Name some ways that this prayer comes true for you, your church, your community, or your nation.
- Do we have a responsibility to help ensure that everyone has daily bread?
- If so, what are some things we might do to meet that responsibility?

4. Hospitality

The story of Abraham, Sarah, and God at the oaks of Mamre is a bit unclear because we have at least a couple of versions of the story that are now merged together in the current text of Genesis 18. So it is confusing at points whether Abraham is talking to three men (who are probably angels) or whether he is talking just to God. But the basic point is the same: Abraham and Sarah are role models when it comes to ancient rules of hospitality.

The hospitality code tells you how to deal with travelers who come into your neighborhood. Travelers in the ancient world were inherently vulnerable because they were cut off from their own networks of mutual economic support, their extended families. Because they were vulnerable, they also were potentially dangerous. As the Jamaican singer Bob Marley once said, "a hungry man is an angry man."

You can deal with a threat by trying to crush it, or you can deal with it by trying to neutralize it. By inviting the stranger to sit at his table, Abraham is trying to neutralize the threat. He is inviting the stranger temporarily to become part of his household and therefore to play by the rules of his household, to commit to the long-term welfare of the house of Abraham. It is a mutually beneficial relationship—sustenance for the traveler and security for the household.

- Who are the strangers in our world today?
- What might a code of hospitality look like today?
- What might we do as a community, a nation, a church, or a family to practice hospitality?

Closing

Close with this prayer or another one you choose:

God of sweet manna in the desert,
give us today our daily bread,
lead us through this wilderness,
feed us with your gracious love,
and inspire us to share.

Rain mercy on us,
quench our burning thirst,
bring us to the place of rest.

Accept our praise,
for you are our God,
our strength,
our hope,
our life.

You have provided,
and always will.

Grant us the courage to receive,
and the wisdom to share,
that every single one
may find
exactly
what she,
what he,
what they,
need.
Amen.

This is from a set of four lessons written by Rev. Dr. Richard H. Lowery, an ordained Disciples of Christ minister, retired Hebrew Bible professor, and President Emeritus of the Disciples of Christ Historical Society. He examines stewardship from the perspective of the faith of ancient Israel. The lessons advance to touch on Second Testament themes and their connection to the faith of Israel and how these ideas have been adopted and understood by the Church.