



FOOD

and the Faith of Life.

Sustainable September 2011 | Bible Studies



Week One | Exodus 12: 1-14

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Christ our Passover Lamb

We hope you enjoy this short journey through Exodus 12:1-14. Do not feel compelled to complete the study; linger where you need to, create your own discussion in sections that engage you the most, or wander through and answer the questions set in the study. We recommend that you share the reading amongst the group. Exodus 12:1-14 tells of the amazing rescue conducted by God to save his people from oppression in Egypt.

Contextual Notes

Exodus 12-15 tells of the amazing rescue that God carried out to rescue his people from slavery in Egypt, and to make them into a nation.

Four centuries before these events, the sons of Jacob had gone down into Egypt to escape famine and had settled there and, over the years, had grown in number. Eventually, a new Pharaoh came to power and enslaved them. God called Moses to tell Pharaoh to “let my people go.” Pharaoh kept refusing; every time he refused, a plague would be sent to the nation of Egypt. We are now on the night of the tenth plague – the plague upon the firstborn – which is also the night that God opens a path of release from the bondage of slavery in Egypt, and sets his people on a path towards the Promised Land.

Digging in...

Read Exodus 12:1-14

1. Make a list, summarising those things that people of Israel were to do on this night.
2. What was a household to do if it didn't have a lamb (v.4)? What does this tell us about the community of God's people?
3. This festival was called the Passover; why was it given that name (v.12-13)?
4. The Israelites were told that they were to keep having this meal in the coming generations, long after they had been freed from Egypt. Why (v.14)?

In this narrative, we read the instructions for the first Passover. There were six elements to the instructions: the time of year (12:2-3a), the food of the meal (12:3b-6, 8), the dressing of the door with the blood of the lamb (12:7), the clothing to be worn and the manner in which the meal was to be eaten (12:11), the meaning of the meal (12:12-13), and the command to eat the meal every year (12:14). No member of the community was to miss out on this meal for any economic reason; there was to be generosity and equity among God's people, such that all could participate fully.

The food and ritual of the meal revolved around the lamb. The lamb was to be the best of the family's flock, and the preparation was to be a community event. Crucially, the lamb wasn't only to be eaten; its blood (representing its life) was to be smeared on the threshold of the home.

God was coming in judgment upon Egypt; yet when he saw the blood of the lamb upon the homes of the Israelites, his judgment would “pass over” them, and they would not be struck down – hence, the “Passover”.



The Israelites were to continue this ritual throughout the generations following their rescue from Egyptian slavery. By eating this memorial meal, they would remember, celebrate and give thanks for the salvation that God had wrought for them.

Looking forward...

In the New Testament, Jesus tells us that the whole Old Testament story points to, and is fulfilled in, him (Lk.24:25-27, 44-45; Jn.5:39, 46). This includes the Exodus. The Exodus, in the Christian understanding, is an event that points beyond itself, like a sign that points to what's lying ahead. In the New Testament, Jesus is understood to have fulfilled the pattern of salvation that God set in motion in the Exodus – Israel's rescue from Egypt points ahead of itself to Jesus, the true Passover lamb who was slain (Jn.1:29; 1 Cor.5:7; Rev.5:6, 12), and who by his death and resurrection rescued his people from slavery to sin and death (Rom.6). What's more, just as Israel was to eat the Passover yearly to remember their rescue, so Jesus gave a meal to remember his saving work which fulfilled the Passover – Holy Communion, or the Lord's Supper.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:17-23

1. What was the problem in Corinthian church with their celebration of the Lord's Supper? (vv. 20-22)
2. Paul can even say that because of their behaviour, their eating of the Lord's Supper is not *really* the eating of the Lord's Supper (v.20). Why was this particular issue so important?
3. Compare Exodus 12:4; do you see any connections between what is said there, and what was happening in Corinth?
4. What is the purpose of the Lord's Supper (vv. 23-26)?

One of the most powerful ways in which Jesus communicated the meaning of his death was by instituting this meal on the night before his death. It was similar to a Passover meal, but he himself (his body, his blood) was placed in the middle of it. The church has done this ever since that night, to remember the Lord's death for us, and proclaim it until he returns.

In Corinth though, things had got out of hand. Originally, the Lord's Supper was a full meal, with bread and wine ceremonially shared as part of it. When they did this in Corinth, the whole thing was completely unbalanced – rich people were stuffing themselves and getting drunk, while poor people were going hungry. Here was this meal which was meant to symbolise and celebrate the new community of love, peace and life that had been created through Christ's death and resurrection, and instead it only showed up division, greed and inequality! And so Paul says that this simply will not do.

Thinking it through...

1. Why do you think, when Jesus wanted us to remember his death for us, he gave us a *meal* to remember him, rather than some other way? What is it about sharing a meal that makes it so appropriate?
2. How would you react receiving this letter? What would the Apostle Paul say if he saw the way that your church celebrates Holy Communion?
3. How can we examine ourselves before we share the Lord's Supper? Are there ever times when we *shouldn't* receive it?
4. Do members of your church ever get together for meals in one another's homes? If so, what is that experience like? If not, why not?



5. The way we share the Lord's Supper should speak of the equality and justice of God's kingdom. What else can we do to show that forth in the wider world, particularly with regards to food?

The community of God's people, gathered around Jesus, and empowered by his Spirit, has a vital role to play in the world, as a sign and promise of God's coming kingdom and reign. This must be true in our community life, in such things as the hospitality of the Lord's Table and the hospitality of our homes, but it also must be true as we engage with the wider global village. You might like to have a look at The Global Poverty Project website to find practical ways to be salt and light in the world:

<http://www.globalpovertyproject.com/pages/presentation>

Another resource that you might like to look at is a book by Tim Chester called *A Meal With Jesus*. This book is a wonderful exploration of the importance of shared meals in the Christian life.



Week Two | Romans 14: 1-14

Leanne Doak, Jill Gleeson & Pamela Turner

Extravagant Hospitality

Introduction

In this Bible Study we hope that you will feel free to add your own stories and share their message with the group. We have provided a little of Paul's context in his letter to the Romans, but the thrust of the study is to engage in discussion to explore Paul's message of God's grace and hospitality. How does it play out in our daily lives – in our life; work, honouring and celebration? How might we do better? How does the hospitality of the table symbolise Paul's message? We hope you enjoy this journey and that it provides food for thought and for the soul.

Text: Romans 14:1-14

Welcome to those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarrelling over opinions. Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgement on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. Who are you to pass judgement on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. Those who observe the day, observe it in honour of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honour of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honour of the Lord and give thanks to God.

We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.

Why do you pass judgement on your brother or your sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or your sister? For we will all stand before the judgement seat of God. For it is written:

“As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,
and every tongue shall give praise to God.”

So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

Let us therefore no longer pass judgement on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or a hindrance in the way of another. I know I am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it is unclean.

Context

Most of Paul's letters are addressed to Christian communities which he founded, thus growing his mission as their founding apostle. However Paul had not founded the church at Rome, rather the large Jewish community was the context in which it arose. As Gentiles became part of the community, tensions developed between them. Jews and Jewish Christians were expelled from Rome in 49CE under the emperor Claudius, and on their return to Rome in 54CE the tensions escalated as the Christian 'Jews' expected resumption of their place of leadership over the Christian 'pagans' who had never left the city.



In his letter to the Romans Paul was preparing a systematic defence of the Law-free gospel for non-Jews upon which he had been preaching. There has been scholarly debate as to whether Romans was a general 'letter-essay' circulated throughout many Christian communities, or whether it was directed specifically to the situation in Rome. Because Paul was preaching unity, made possible by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, he most likely intended to help the Roman Christians to deal with their internal conflict. This is especially pertinent in Romans 14:1-15:3.

There appear to be two issues in the dispute in 14:1-14. One concerns kosher food and the other concerns the observance of certain sacred days. Whatever the specific issues were, Paul regarded them as merely opinions which were non-essential to Christian faith. His major concern for the Roman community of Christ was that neither group judge the other. Judgement of fellow Christians in these matters, Paul admonishes, wrongfully takes over the task that is God's alone, and fails to discern the radical equality that exists among Christians at that time and for all time. Observance or non-observance of food and calendar differences must proceed from faith in a God who loves all, and not from discrimination, judgement or contempt. Paul challenges diverse Christians to acknowledge that God accepts people whose practices and views they regard to be unacceptable. He encourages followers of Christ to accept each other's differences so that they may share the Lord's Supper.

The main themes in Romans 14:1-14 are welcome; unity and honouring. There is thematic overlap, but the following three contemporary snapshots illustrate each theme, and invite the participants in the Bible Study to discuss the questions offered, and additional stories and question within the group.

Snapshot: Welcome

We had arrived in Ephesus on a bitter January evening. Our tiny inn was devoid of warmth and food, so wearing all the clothes we'd brought, we found our way into the main township, sleepy in its mid-winter state. Figuring that a sip of alcohol might revive our numbed feet, we spotted a hole-in-the-wall tavern, looking rather like a 1950's photo. We hustled in to find a little room lined with empty shelves, lit with a bare globe and meagre warmth emanating from a single, broken bar on a geriatric heater. It looked grim indeed, but we were too embarrassed to leave the craggy, smiling face that peered out over the bar. The owner stood and waved us enthusiastically in. He moved the only two seats near his perch and turned the dodgy heater to face us. Still grinning, he patted my head and shook my husband's hand and we sat smiling at each other. Strangely I felt at home.

Suddenly remembering his duties, the apple-cheeked owner sprang up and went behind the bar, rubbing his beard. We were short on Turkish and he had no English, but he gestured to the only beverage available and poured little glasses of beer for us. He put them on the table, but I felt that he was troubled. He motioned for us to wait there and disappeared into a back room. Some time later our host emerged smiling, and placed before us with great pride, a saucer. On it were a dozen carrot rings, each speared with a toothpick and sprinkled with vinegar. I confess that my first instinct was curiosity, and then I understood. This lovely Ephesian had given us all of what he had. It was his joy to provide for us, strangers of a different race, language and religion, with his finest hospitality. He bid us come in, he warmed us in body and spirit, and in hospitality and warm welcome we were made one.

To discuss:

What are some of the ways we extend extravagant, all-that-we-have welcome to others? Are they unconditional? Have you experienced such welcome?

How do we transfer our practice of the hospitality of God into all the different communities in which we participate?



Snapshot: Unity

A group of us were at our parish making palm crosses, when a man wandered in. He was clearly an alcoholic and already at this early hour, had had too much to drink. Someone in the group immediately offered him a 'cuppa', which he accepted. He sat with us, watching the palm crosses being made. Whilst not everyone in the group was comfortable with him joining us, I remember feeling a sense of connection with him and my thoughts were: "Here is another broken person, just like me."

To discuss:

What are the advantages and joys of inclusion? Share stories you may have.

How do we use food, shared meals and the humble 'cuppa' to discover the advantages and joys of inclusion?

Snapshot: Honouring

At my ordination retreat, there were five ordinands and our spiritual director. Between the six of us, there were three different sets of dietary requirements. Our hosts, nuns in the Roman Catholic faith, took great delight in the challenge of cooking appropriate meals for each of those requirements, all of which took much time and energy for six people, especially in the menu planning and shopping. The Sisters had to carefully check all the ingredients so that they could say to the best of their knowledge that each dish was safe for us to eat. In this way they were honouring their commitment to nourish and provide for us and could stand strongly in their integrity. One example was that of a particular morning tea. There were three varieties of cookies to cater for each requirement. Each one of us had a cookie to enjoy. No-one was excluded. The hospitality extended to us made us feel very welcome and cared for. We knew and were thankful for the Sisters' understanding that by providing for us in this special way, they were keeping observance in honour of the Lord.

To discuss:

With a view to spiritual and environmental sustainability, how do our food choices as consumers reflect honour and integrity?



Week Three | Exodus 16:2-15

Roslyn Fairless, Nicholas Lockwood

- ❖ Read Exodus 16:2-15. What stands out for you?
- ❖ What do you think the main point of the text is?

We enter the Israelites' story at a point where God has heard his people's cry and fulfilled his promise to deliver them from Egypt. They have begun their wilderness wanderings but are yet to receive the ten commandments at Mount Sinai and are yet to reach the promised land, yet to receive the ten commandments at Mount Sinai. You may have noticed there are some significant themes that emerge in the text: complaining, testing and knowing God is/as God.

COMPLAINING

- ❖ How many times, and in what verses, do you find references to complaining in the text?
- ❖ What is the Israelites' reason for complaining?
- ❖ Do you feel their complaint is valid?
- ❖ How does Moses respond to their complaining?

TESTING

This story is bracketed by two stories about God's provision of water for the Israelites following their escape through the Reed Sea; at the heart of these stories is also the theme of testing (notice verses 15.25, 17.2b, 7).

- ❖ Can you also find and note references to the theme of testing in 16.2-15?
- ❖ What is the purpose of testing according to the text?

KNOWING GOD

- ❖ At what points in the story does God speak?
- ❖ How has God responded to the complaining?
- ❖ What does God's response and what God says tell you about the nature of God?
- ❖ What does God's response and what God says tell you about God's motivation for acting in this way?
- ❖ What is provision linked to (see 16.12)?

You might like to look at other texts in the Bible which speak of knowing God (eg Ex 15.26; John 17.3).

If provision and life is found in knowing God, how does this speak to the question of environmental, fiscal, social and cultural sustainability?



Sustainability reflection: Food matters

Western Australians should readily relate to a story of people dwelling in a desert wilderness, but most of us are so insulated by a convoluted chain of food supply that few of us stop to think about how vulnerable we are to the vagaries of nature.

We can also tend to be unaware of about how our choices impact upon other people and the whole of creation. Increasing food prices, poor harvests and instability of supply are already leading to socio-political unrest in regions in the Middle East and North Africa. ¹ Perhaps like the Israelites, we in the world today are making a journey through some strange new territory, like it or not! We are becoming increasingly aware of how our consumer choices affect others, and of the importance of securing food and water supplies for the world's population now, and preserving them for the future.

Does being one of God's people include taking responsibility for how our consumption affects other people and the environment?

You couldn't sensibly argue that Ex 16.2-15 reflects God's wish for us to eat more local produce or go vego. Mind you, they're good ideas. Buying locally grown, seasonal produce not only supports local producers, but also uses foods that consume less fossil fuel for processing, transportation and refrigeration. Almost 20% of Australia's CO2 emissions comes from meat production and a 2010 UN report recommended reduced consumption of animal products in order to protect the world from the worst impacts of climate change. ² However, in a society where we often purchase much more than we need, either to over-indulge or to throw much of it away when it spoils (why we/I do this is even more food for thought), I think there is a clearer and more pertinent take-home environmental message in today's text.

In our Exodus 16 story of provision, all who gather have...enough (v18). The pattern of consumption, even that of collecting a little extra and storing it before the day of rest, is in line with need. There are certainly instances elsewhere in scripture where food is associated with celebration and enjoyment, but here it is provided, gathered and shared in a particular way which not only fosters survival and social stability, but also leads to a harmonious rhythm of living and a deeper knowledge of God.

Does being one of God's people include being more mindful of, and thankful for, the provision of my daily needs?

Does the need for self-limiting, as individuals and as nations, make the selection of food a spiritual, as well as a material, exercise?

❖ *Following this Bible study, are there any implications from your "vertical" relationship with God – your knowing God – towards your "horizontal" relationships with your family, community and the world that you need to attend to?*

¹ Cleary, Paul. *Securing the Global Food Supply*. The Weekend Australian (Inquirer insert), June 18-19, 2011, p2.

² Carus, Felicity. *UN Urges Global Move to Meat and Dairy-Free Diet*.



Week Four | Psalm 78

Christine Duke & David Skirving

We conclude our studies for *Sustainability September* with Psalm 78, the second longest Psalm in the Psalter. The Psalm outlines elements of Israel's history, from the time of Moses through to David. It reflects a God who *acts and speaks* to His people, and summarises His *deeds and commands*. God is shown to be a shepherd for Israel, and a judge of their, (and their enemies'), actions. We move repeatedly through elements of *redemption and provision* followed by *judgment and love*. Ultimately, we discover a God whose provision and goodness is met, in the main, with Israel's ingratitude.

The focus for this study is on God's provision and goodness, and our role as Christians to love and care for His people. So, what does this all mean for us in a contemporary setting, and where do we find relevance in our lives and the lives of those we have never met?

Recent articles in "*The West Australian*" newspaper have again, brought to light, issues of the enormous wastage of food by society at local, national and international levels.

Read the articles at the following links

Dumpster Divers on a Mission to Stop Waste

<http://au.news.yahoo.com/thewest/a/-/breaking/9493722/dumpster-divers-on-a-mission-to-stop-waste/>

Global Food Glut, a Culture of Waste and Control

<http://au.news.yahoo.com/thewest/a/-/wa/9493721/global-food-glut-a-culture-of-waste-and-control/>

It is noteworthy that local "*dumpster divers*" are out in force, on a mission to retrieve select goods that have been disposed of, in order to redistribute them for consumption, as a rebellion against a societal trend of waste.

"We waste, on an island of affluence amid a global sea of poverty, where about 900 million people go to bed hungry each night."

Looking at matters from a global perspective, the *United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation's* study released in May 2011 highlights the fact that:-

"...about one third of food produced for human consumption was lost or wasted globally, which amounted to more than one billion tonnes a year."

Begin to discern what emotions surface for you when you read these articles. What do they reveal to you in relation to the abundance of God's provision, as well as the ways in which we, His children, share and distribute goods to all humanity?

Read Psalm 78 whilst taking notice of the feelings that are aroused in you as you read.

- ❖ What feelings did you experience and why?
- ❖ What are we called to do with:- "*...the things we have heard and known.*" (Ps: 78 verse 3 – NRSV).
- ❖ Why are we called to do this?
- ❖ What parallels can be drawn to the articles in "*The West Australian?*"



Re-read verses 23-29:- How did God provide for Israel?

- ❖ If God is a God of abundant provision, then how can we, as God's ambassadors in the world, direct His provision to all?
- ❖ What notions of sharing and distribution does this ignite for you?
- ❖ What can we do to help address global poverty and thus extend God's care and concern to all?

Read John 6:48-51 - NRSV

How do Jesus' words help us to understand Psalm 78 and God's *eternal provision* for the world?

How do we juxtapose God's provision with:-

- World poverty?
- The death of so many through starvation?
- The wastage of food?
- Children going to school hungry, without breakfast?
- Families under increasing pressure, juggling expenses and decisions, perhaps having to choose whether to pay the electricity bill or buy food etc?

Are there any other issues which come to mind for you?

Concluding thoughts and questions for reflection...

Over the last four weeks, have your views on sustainability changed, if so how and why?

What have you, as an individual, been challenged to do differently within your own household as well as on a larger scale?

What can you do to encourage others to discern their role and take action to bring about a sustainable planet for both the current and future generations?

As a member of a broader Church community, how have these studies influenced your comprehension of the relationship between God, humanity and the world?

Over the coming weeks, may we as Christians be empowered by the Spirit to create a new vision for society, (much like that of the first Christians), in which we adopt a fresh approach to sustainability and the distribution of goods. Pray that through the Spirit we can do our part to help foster both local and global communities, based on ideals that promote *sharing all* with our brothers and sisters, whilst minimising waste, with an attitude of perpetual thankfulness for God's abundant and eternal provision.