

Heavenly Bread

After God miraculously delivered the children of Israel through the sea, destroying the enemy Egyptian army, it didn't take long for them to begin to complain against God and Moses, his servant. At an oasis at Marah, they complained because the water was too bitter to drink (15:22-27). The Lord responded by making the water drinkable, but that didn't end the complaining. When they came to the wilderness of Sin (no connection with our English word "sin"), they complained about being hungry. In response, God graciously gave them food to eat—bread from heaven. **Exodus 16:2-15.**

"² The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. ³ The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

⁴ Then the LORD said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. ⁵ On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days."⁶ So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, "In the evening you shall know that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt, ⁷ and in the morning you shall see the glory of the LORD, because he has heard your complaining against the LORD. For what are we, that you complain against us?"⁸ And Moses said, "When the LORD gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because the LORD has heard the complaining that you utter against him—what are we? Your complaining is not against us but against the LORD."

⁹ Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, 'Draw near to the LORD, for he has heard your complaining.'"¹⁰ And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud. ¹¹ The LORD spoke to Moses and said, ¹² "I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the LORD your God.'"

¹³ In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. ¹⁴ When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. ¹⁵ When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat."

When the Israelites saw this mysterious substance on the ground they said “man-hu,” “What is it?” (15). Thus the name for this “bread” that God gave to the Israelites became manna, which was to be their staple food for their 40 year wilderness wanderings. A lot of effort has been made by scholars to explain exactly what it was, but it was a tasty and evidently nutritious substance that was to sustain the Israelites for 40 years until they entered the Promised Land and could grow crops of their own. Unlike what we think of as bread, manna was apparently like the “sweet secretion of the tamarisk tree,” a honey-like, flakey substance that could be easily gathered and stored.

Some of us remember as newlyweds eating “manna.” When our brides, novices in the kitchen, brought us a dish for dinner, perhaps our mental response was “What is it?” But we discovered that God more than sustained us during the occasional meals of “manna.” We know also that the manna God gave to the complaining Israelites was a divine provision, regardless of its similarity to natural substances. In fact, Paul says it was the “spiritual food” which God gave to his people in the wilderness (1 Cor. 10:3). This physical substance became for us a type of the spiritual substance we have in Christ Jesus, who is the fulfillment of what was prefigured in the manna in the wilderness (Jn. 6:32f, 35ff, 48ff).

So soon after God’s miraculous deliverance through the Sea, the Israelites began to grumble and complain, revealing their deeply rooted nature of unbelief. These disgruntled Israelites began to idealize the past in Egypt, remembering only the few advantages and minimizing the hardships, such as oppressive slavery. As has been said, it was easier to get Israel out of Egypt than to get Egypt out of the Israelites. Manna, heavenly bread, is a picture of the grace of God. God’s response to the grumbling of his people was to give them “meat to eat in the evening and all the bread (they would want) in the morning” (8).

Like the Israelites, I too am one of God’s being-delivered people, having crossed the Red Sea. But I find myself often forgetful of the grace of God, his goodness to sustain me in the wilderness. How often I still fail to pass the test of trusting God, as I grumble and complain about difficult circumstances. The complaining spirit of the Israelites was evidence of their need for testing. God was to perform the miracle of providing food for his rebellious children, and their trust would be their test (4). The years in the wilderness were to be “a school of life” for the Israelites. And in God’s school of life, we never know when he’ll give us a test. But unlike with some of your teachers or professors, you never have to fear or dread his tests. In fact, James says we are “consider it pure joy” when we are tested because God is at work to develop our character into Christ-like maturity (1:2ff). But I’ll tell you a secret—I don’t like God’s tests!

In this wilderness school of life, the Lord was showing his people that his heavenly bread was to be *his provision of every need, eternal and temporal*. Whatever the substance of this manna, it was God’s miraculous provision, as was the evening

meal of quail (large migrations easily caught). God miraculously provided in order to feed such a great number of pilgrim wanderers for 40 years, day and night (Ps. 78:23ff). This manna was God's provision for their immediate needs, but also represented the presence of Christ, their spiritual food (1 Cor. 10:3).

Jesus taught us to pray to the heavenly Father for our daily bread, which means obviously our dependence on him for our physical needs as well as for eternal life in Christ (Matt. 6:11). As Paul reasons, we who are God's children by faith in Christ, have already received the greatest "bread," the gift of his Son who has given us eternal life. How much more reason do we have to believe that God will also "graciously give us all things" (Rom. 8:32)!

We're often like these Israelites who failed the test of trusting God to provide for their daily needs, and thus they hoarded "unauthorized" manna, more than their allocated share. Like these Israelites, we claim to be God's redeemed people, delivered through the Sea, through the cross and resurrection of Jesus. Yet, though professing faith, we often act like "practical atheists," living and fretting and worrying and complaining as though God doesn't exist. We're like the Israelites the psalmist said who "provoked the Holy One of Israel" and "did not keep in mind his power" which he had revealed in Egypt and through the parting of the waters (Ps. 78:41ff).

The message of the bread from heaven is one of keeping our focus on the love, wisdom and faithfulness of God, to "keep in mind his power," says the psalmist. This bread from heaven is all about God's grace. As I read through the Psalms, daily I'm called to trust in the steadfast love and faithfulness of the Lord, and rebuked for my fretting, anxious and unbelieving disposition. I'm sleepless at night because I fail to trust there'll be manna in the morning.

God was teaching his people to live with *daily dependence*. The Lord commanded the people to gather this bread from heaven "each day" (4). The petition in the Lord's Prayer, "Give us this day..." probably derives from this verse. Moses was furious with the Israelites who tried to store up more than they needed, in direct disobedience to the Lord's instructions (20). One of the great challenges in the life of following Jesus is to learn to depend on the Father for our daily needs, especially in this materialistic age, when we find it difficult to separate our wants from our real needs.

I certainly need to grow in grace that will enable me to trust God for his faithful, daily provision. Even though we have enough food in our cupboards and refrigerator for today and probably for a few weeks ahead, I need to live in a spirit of daily dependence on his sustaining grace; that I'll practice what I preach about trusting God. However God chooses to provide, by our job, retirement, or unemployment, he is our faithful provider who has promised to supply every need of ours according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:19).

Jesus made it very clear that the manna of the Israelites was prophetic of him as the eternal Bread from Heaven (Jn. 6:25-59). He is the source of our life and we are to receive him and live in a love relationship with the Father through him. Though we haven't seen him, Peter says, we love him and believe in him and are filled with "an inexpressible and glorious joy" (1 Pet. 1:8). When Jesus clearly identified himself as the Bread of Life and said that his followers must feed upon and drink of him in order to have eternal life, the crowd thinned out. Obviously, they were willing to follow him as the provider of material food and as an earthly kingdom "savior," but were unwilling to seek and live upon Jesus himself. They wanted what he could provide, not Jesus himself, just as many today want what Jesus can do for them and aren't so interested in seeking Jesus himself (Jn. 6:60-66).

Once we decide with Simon Peter that Jesus alone has the words of eternal life (Jn. 6:68), then we must also engage in the daily discipline of appropriating Jesus and receiving his resurrection life in the here and now. We are given the life of Jesus through the Holy Spirit, who is Christ in us (Col. 1:27). We are to seek to walk in step with the Spirit day by day and to allow the Holy Spirit to fill and totally influence us in gradual Christ-character formation (Gal. 5:16-25; Eph. 5:18). This we experience as we engage in corporate worship with the Body of Christ, and in personal, daily worship through Scripture reading and listening prayer.

The Israelites couldn't hoard manna for the next day, so we can't live on occasional 'mountaintop' worship experiences or past blessings, but must daily come before the Lord in worship and prayer, seeking daily cleansing of sin and a fresh word from the Scripture that will correct, direct and encourage us. Just as manna was gathered in the morning, that's usually the best time for our personal worship and listening prayer time. There' a bunch of biblical examples, headed by Jesus himself, who were early risers, suggesting that it's best to begin our days with a good meal of manna. Jesus himself, at his desert temptation experience, quoted Scripture to the devil, who sought to tempt him to turn stones into bread: "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God'" (Matt. 4:4, quoting Deut. 8:3).

Our daily discipline is not to lead us to a self-directed, self-centered type of Christian piety that ignores the needs of others. The more I reflect on the promises of God's provision for his people, such as in Matthew 6:25ff and Philipians 4:19, the more I think these promises speak to the responsibility of the Body of Christ, the church and Christian community, to help the needy and share with the poor. The Apostle Paul quoted our text (16) when he emphasized our responsibility to share our abundance with those in need, "so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality, as it is written: 'He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little'" (2 Cor. 8:13ff). When we share our resources with those in need, we find greater blessing for ourselves and also participate in the joy of the harvest of God's meeting all of our needs as well (Matt. 6:33).

DT Niles (1908-1970), Sri Lankan evangelist, ecumenical leader and hymn writer, is well known for his definition of evangelism: "One beggar telling another beggar where to find bread." And the Bread of Life transforms beggars into abounding children of the King. Monthly we at Dale Heights share the Table of our Lord, the sacramental Bread of Life. As Jesus said, other food spoils and eventually fails to nourish and satisfy, but the Bread of Life "endures to eternal life" (Jn. 6:27).

I'm learning that the Heavenly Bread, God's grace, is enough for me and is leading me to be less satisfied with earthly bread and to yearn for the heavenly. That "manna" we ate as newlyweds was O K, and maybe not the best tasting, but it got us through. In my decades of being a follower of Christ, I have often questioned God, the way he is choosing to feed me and sustain me in my daily life of faith, trust and obedience. Just like newlyweds, I looked at the dish and asked, "What is it?" and "Why this?" My mother had an expression for having lost zest for certain foods that were served too frequently, as having become "long in the tooth."

But God's supply of blessings is new every morning. We need to trust that God desires to give blessings we're not prepared to receive because of our lack of faith and trust. As we prepare to share the sacrament of his Supper, realize that Christ gives himself to us. The Bread from Heaven is the broken body of Christ given for us. We're fed by the broken bread and the cup of his blood. The manna that gives us life is the broken body of Christ, who'll sustain us as we feed on what he gives us, even when we don't recognize it. It is always enough and will sustain us into the abundance of eternity.