



PROJECT BIBLE DURING LENT

Manna from Heaven – A Lesson in Reliance

Living in the most scientifically-informed culture in the history of the world, we 21st century westerners face an uphill climb if we hope to consciously rely on God. For centuries and millennia, people explained, not just the religious impulse, but what happens in the cosmos, human history, weather, and the human psyche by reference to God's power, will, and intervention. People prayed for good crops or safe sea travel or anything else, imagining that humans' lives were determined by the Athenas and Zeuses of their world. But in the modern period, science has stepped in to rationalize for us the ways of our world. As western individualism has increased the sense of self-determination among us, we see the world as less God-influenced.

Then, there is our increased affluence. Most of us don't live on the edge of poverty or financial disaster. We provide for ourselves, with retirement plans that take care of the future, and incomes that take care of our present. We pray thanks over some dinners (not all) but most of us feel no pressing need for God to intervene in our material lives – to give us "our daily bread."

Amid all this surfeit and superfluity, what does it look like to rely on God? That question ushers us to the story of the Hebrew people and Manna, when God supplied Israel's food in the wilderness, but only day by day. By the time bread comes from the sky, God has sent a deliverer (Moses) and tormented one of the most powerful rulers in the world (Pharaoh), but these were one-time heroics and interventions. In the Education of Israel, daily reliance on food may have played an even greater part. It may even be a piece of what eventually prompted Jesus to tell his audiences to "take no thought for tomorrow."

In this session, we learn the rudiments of reliance on God. Let's read.

God Sends Daily Bread (and Meat)

The words roll off our tongues every Sunday: "Give us this day our daily bread." One day, Jesus' disciples made a request: "Teach us to pray!" His reply has been spoken by twenty centuries of his followers since, and he put that line right in the middle of it. But 1500 years before that session on a Galilean hillside, Israel experienced another kind of daily bread from God. Maybe Jesus had it in the back of his mind when he spoke his immortal prayer.

Not too long before manna began to show up on the lawn, God had orchestrated the Hebrew people' escape from Pharaoh's control, by secreting them through the Red Sea in the nick of

time. But, in spite of that miraculous rescue, after some long days wandering in the wilderness, they began to complain bitterly:

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. (Exodus 16.3)

The contemporary Christian musician, Keith Green, wrote a song to ridicule their ingratitude...and remind us that we are often similarly ungrateful. Here's an excerpt:

So you wanna go back to Egypt
Where it's warm and secure
Are sorry you bought the one way ticket
When you thought you were sure
You wanted to live in the land of promise
But now it's getting so hard
Are you sorry you're out here in the desert
Instead of your own back yard
Eating leaks and onions by the Nile
Ooh what breath for dining out in style
Ooh, my life's on the skids
Building the pyramids...

So you wanna to back to Egypt
Where your friends wait for you
You can throw a big party and tell the whole gang
That what they said was all true
And this Moses acts like a big shot
Who does he think he is?
Well it's true that God works lots of miracles
But Moses thinks they're all his.
Oh we're having so much trouble even now
Why'd he get so mad about that c-c-c-cow (that golden calf)
Moses seems rather idle
He just sits around, he just sits around and writes the Bible!

As ungrateful as Israel's complaints may seem to us as we read the story, God listened and responded.

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. ⁵On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days... 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.” (Exodus 16.4-5, 12)

The next morning, Israel awoke to a manna breakfast. All they had to do was pick the stuff up and eat it and, Voila! Breakfast.

God made one solitary stipulation: each offering was bread for that day alone. God told them,

“Gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer to a person according to the number of persons, all providing for those in their own tents.”¹⁷ The Israelites did so, some gathering more, some less.¹⁸ But when they measured it with an omer, those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed.¹⁹ And Moses said to them, “Let no one leave any of it over until morning.”²⁰ But they did not listen to Moses; some left part of it until morning, and it bred worms and became foul. And Moses was angry with them.²¹ Morning by morning they gathered it, as much as each needed; but when the sun grew hot, it melted.

Like a coupon with an expiration date, manna was only good for the morning it was gathered. And gathering more than your share didn't help, because each person ended up with an omer. Strange...and instructive to us.

How much is enough? In a small village or a small planet, how much is enough? How big is our proper omer of manna?

The one exception to God's one-day-only rule for manna happened on Fridays, when the Israelites were instructed to gather enough for two days so they could save the second portion and do no Sabbath work. In this exception, God clearly meant this daily bread to be daily for a long time and not just a patch-through, because he hadn't given the Sabbath command yet and wouldn't for another four chapters. Ultimately, Israel ate the same breakfast every morning for forty years, so the question of how manna practices would happen within Sabbath-keeping practices mattered...for a long time!

Viva la...Sameness!

To our eye, the Hebrews' diet of daily manna and quail undoubtedly seems to lack a certain spice of variety. Manna makes it into Keith Green's, song about Israel's ingratitude:

Well there's nothing do but travel
And we sure travel a lot
'Cause it's hard to keep your feet from moving
When the sand gets so hot
And in the morning it's manna hotcakes
We snack on manna all day
And we sure had a winner last night for dinner
Flaming manna soufflé...

Oh, Moses, put down your pen!
What? Oh no, manna again?
Oh, manna waffles...
Manna burgers
Manna bagels
Fillet of manna
Manna patties...
BaManna bread!

All of this through modern western eyes. But even some of us know from growing up in rural America that, through history, by far the majority experience of humans has been sameness. Krishnendu Ray, a food-studies scholar at NYU, comments about dietary variety: “Newness or difference from the norm is a very urban, almost postmodern, quest. It is recent. It is class-based.” Most people in most cultures have eaten the same foods. As part of that huge pattern in the history of humanity, the Israelites had almost certainly eaten the same things almost every day in Egypt, and they would almost certainly continue that practice when they reached the promised land.

In this dietary sameness, the ancient Hebrews unwittingly observed a salutary cultural practice that everyday 21st-century people – along with brain scientists and nutritionists – would eventually rediscover and praise. *Atlantic Magazine* ran an article in February of 2019 with the rather obvious and bland title, “The People Who Eat the Same Meal Every Day.” The author builds a case that repeating the same foods day after day can actually help us in a variety of ways – reducing stress, ensuring nutritional value (as long as the repeated food is properly nutritious), and avoiding the growing number of food allergies, to name three. The evidence for its benefits is both anecdotal and scientific. Many who repeat the same breakfasts and lunches report that it lowers their stress by reducing the burden of decision-making, which in a fast-paced, workaday world, is a gift. Brain scientists like it too. They have come to picture what we call “will power” as a final muscle that tires as we get further into a day and the number of times we use the muscle increases. Taking away two or three significant will-powered decisions each day – eggs, pancakes, waffles, oatmeal, or protein shake?! – by eating the same well-chosen meal leaves more decision-making and will-power available for other more important choices.

The next modern benefit that Israel received experienced was simple convenience. In their daily manna and quail, God gave the Israelites what most ancient peoples would

have experienced: the same diet every day. But what differed about their deal was relief from exertion: in an unfamiliar territory, with survival on the line, the Israelites of our story didn't have to forage or fight for their food. Like our pizza shop down the way or the increasingly popular Favor app, God made sure the Israelites' food was delivered to their proverbial door. Not a bad arrangement!

Of course, in a third similarity to contemporary American culture, that good deal of delivered manna and quail did not keep the Israelites from complaining about it!

Miraculous or Mundane

How did God provide this daily food for Israel? Every miracle of the Bible raises for a post-scientific-revolution mind this question. Did Israel really escape through a God-built water wall that stopped the Red Sea from flowing for a while? Or did they escape through the Reed Sea, a much shallower body through which the Hebrew masses could have waded? (Of course, the natural explanation leaves us to wonder how Pharaoh's army could have drown in it.) Did Jesus walk on water? Or did he, as the old joke goes, just know where the rocks were? Beginning in the 17th century, critical thinkers have questioned the Bible's miracle stories and offered naturalistic explanations.

Of course, the naturalizers have taken on manna as well. Here's a recent page from *Cracked*, an online journal that ran a piece called "6 Scientific Explanations for Famous Bible 'Miracles'":

6 Manna From Heaven Was Probably Beetle Cocoons

Wandering the desert can be a real pain in the a**, especially when you have a bunch of furious Egyptians chasing you on horseback and you're running on an empty stomach. None of that is recommended in any of our hiking guides. God, in his mercy, decided to address the latter complaint, and served up a heaping helping of manna: a sweet, edible substance described as "a fine, flake-like thing" which rained down daily from heaven and served to sustain the Israelites during their long journey in the desert.

The Non-Miraculous Explanation:

Manna was less likely some sort of floating baklava and more likely [trehalose](#) -- a naturally occurring, sweet, edible crystalline carbohydrate that's created by a whole slew of organisms, such as bacteria, fungi, plants, and a parasitic beetle called *Trehala manna* (named after the Biblical manna). These beetles are found in Middle East, and their cocoons are [highly nutritious](#), containing both carbs and protein (and a little bit of love!). In fact, this so-called manna is readily available in deserts even today, and is used by the Bedouin as a sweetener. Sure, the reality of it doesn't

change the fact that it saved the Israelites. We're just saying you should picture it less like an arid Willy Wonka reboot and more like an extended episode of *Man vs. Wild*. (https://www.cracked.com/article_23910_6-famous-biblical-miracles-explained-by-science.html)

The question these people raise is a good one, and it is important for Christians to ask it within our modern culture – particularly when the biblical sort of bread-from-heaven, walk-on-water miracle doesn't seem to show up every day in our experience.

Men and women have filled books on this topic, so we can't pretend to resolve it here. Ancient worldviews (and many contemporary pre-modern ones, too) had/have much more space for miracles than we have. People who believe that our contemporary expectation that laws of nature (e.g., gravity, conservation of matter, inertia, etc.) are unbreakable will likely seek a scientific explanation for phenomena – even shoehorn them into the modern worldview, if necessary. Yet we all know of diagnoses that have flummoxed doctors (E.g., my father's very secular heart surgeon called Dad his "miracle man" when he overcame a bleak prognosis.) and seemed miraculous. How shall we look at miracles?

I offer two suggestions. First, changing the question from "did God...?" to "could God have...?" has helped me. The manna story can illustrate for us. Did God rain bread from heaven, or did the Israelites discover an easily-harvested food that sustained them through the wilderness? I'm not sure. What I am quite sure of is that the God who created the universe could have done it. A devout and brilliant English philosophical theologian of the 20th century named Austin Farrer (an intellectual companion of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien) once wrote an elaborate commentary on the Gospel of Mark. In it, he wove the miracles in as an integral part of a theological story that makes beautiful sense of those epic sixteen chapters. At the end of this work, Farrer asks, "Did the miracles of Mark actually occur?" (He never flinched from hard questions.) Then, after an extended reflection, he repeated his query: "Did the miracles of Mark actually occur?" His answer may help you as much as it helped me: "I don't know. But God is the only author ever who can write with history."

My second suggestion concerns the way that we view all of life. It is possible for a miracle-watching form of faith to begin imagining that God is quiet, quiet, inactive, inactive, and then, BAM, God shows up to do a miracle. A Christian view of providence has it that God is constantly helping weave history toward an ultimate end. That means God is moving through a whole lot of humdrum, everyday happenings. A child on the playground goes out of her way to reach the outcast kid and asks her in to the game everyone else is playing; a struggling marriage finds its way, against the odds, back to full footing; a preacher spins a sermon that feels "like she was talking to me". Using the word "miracle" to describe these works would dilute the term. But is God at work?

So did God rain bread miraculously from heaven? Or did those wandering Hebrews find beetle cocoons? We'll never know for sure. But could God have rained bread? And how does it matter?

First-Century Food Delivery

In the biblical story, you and I now get to fast forward about 1500 years and 40 books of the Bible, to find Jesus in a deserted place with 5,000 of his closest friends. In two important ways, this large inquirers class was like those ancient Hebrews. They were out in the wilderness and they were hungry. When Jesus proposed that they feed their friends dinner, his mission team (a.k.a. the 12 disciples) sharpened their pencils and got worried. Philip spoke for the rest: "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little!" They counted their resources. "I saw a kid whose lunchbox has five loaves and a couple fish," offered Peter, "but what good is that in this crowd?!" But Jesus said, "That's a great start!"

Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. (John 6.10-11)

The feeding of the 5,000 is a familiar story to many of us, but has it ever sent your mind to manna? That's where Jesus' mind went...but he saved the thought for the next day.

What would you do if you were hungry and a stranger miraculously fed you? Undoubtedly some simply made their way home that evening, but not many of them forgot what they had seen. That's why the next day, boatloads of those 5,000 chased Jesus down on the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Never one to waste an opportunity to tell truth, Jesus taught them.

When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?"²⁶ Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves."²⁷ Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal."²⁸

These everyday people asked how they could emulate the wonder-worker – "What must we do to perform the works of God?" – he gave them a job they could do: "*This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.*" Then their minds moved to manna.

So they said to him, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread

from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³ *For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.”*

Then came the show-stopping truth toward which their entire two days together had been moving. Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” (Excerpts from John 6)

So what does our weekly prayer, “Give us this day our daily bread,” mean? I’m sure that twenty centuries of Christians uttering those familiar words have naturally and rightly pictured the sort of bread that we use for toast or sandwiches. But Jesus offers us a layer beyond. What would it be for us to hear “daily bread” and think of the one who reminds us that he is our manna?

Praising God for a Manna-Ful Life

God supplied Israel’s “daily bread” (and meat) for 40 years in the wilderness. If we have “ears to hear what the Spirit is saying to the church,” their story can help us reflect on all the ways that God provides for us. We live manna-ful lives, you and I. And that brings up another thing that brain scientists and happiness scholars have been telling us for a while: thankful people are healthier, happier, and live longer. Exodus 16 and John 6 can remind us that the God of the universe has fed us physically and spiritually for long years of life. How shall we respond?

“Be ye thankful!”