

## MANNA

Exodus 16: <sup>4</sup> Then the LORD said to Moses, "I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day.

Some of us grew up in homes where the budget was kinda tight. That is to say, sometimes we had to go without and sometimes we had to cut corners to make ends meet. Recently I ran across a piece of memorabilia from my mother. It was the original bill for her hospital stay when she gave birth to me. I bet you can't guess how much the bill was for?

Five days in the hospital -- \$115. Lab work -- \$7.50. Delivery room -- \$25. Anesthesia -- \$20. And baby bracelet -- \$1.50.

Grand total. \$169. Now the funny thing is, under the bill total I can see that my mother bargained the price down by saying that she would be willing to stay two days less. Grand total: \$129. Look at me. What a bargain! \$129 bucks – reduced for quick sale!

Things were a little tight when I was kid. I was the youngest of six – my father was a mechanic, my mother didn't work until I was ten. I remember a lot of hand-me-downs, a lot of low cost meals, and a lot of bargain-hunting. One thing I do not remember, however, is having to live hand to mouth. This never happened. There was always a roof over our head, food on the table, clothing to wear. We were never desperate. Somehow, God always provided.

I doubt too many of you ever lived hand to mouth either – not knowing where tomorrow's bread was coming from. In general, over the last century, and more, America's prosperity has been strong and we have had reserves tucked away that enabled us to feel confident from month to month, year to year.

Did you ever wonder what it would be like to live day to day like that? It happens, you know? A few years ago I took a group of kids to be a part of an interactive presentation put on by World Vision International. When we got there, we traveled, albeit through headphones, with a young child from AIDS torn Africa. The child lost a father at two and a mother at seven. From that point onward, he had to fend for himself and his younger sibling.

This boy truly lived hand-to-mouth. He had to be concerned, every day, about theft, about mistreatment, about soldiers, disease, and death. All by the time he was seven.

He's not alone. There are plenty like him throughout the world. In fact, did you know that every seven seconds a child in the world dies of hunger? Every seven seconds.

In our text for today, we see that our God cares about the hungry. He cares about the poor. He cares about those whose lives are hand-to-mouth. The Israelites have escaped from Egypt through a series of miraculous plagues, and now they are heading across the desert to the Land of Promise.

But out in the desert there was no food and little water. How would they eat? Where would they turn for food? In grace and love for His people, God provides for them in a miraculous way. He puts a substance on the ground each morning, a residue after the dew was gone, which was edible. I think of it something like a sticky, cotton-candy-like substance. When the Israelites saw it for the first time they said, "What is it?" The word in Hebrew for this question is "manna." And the name stuck. God also, in the evenings, brought low-flying birds into the camp that the Israelites could capture and cook. These were quail.

What's interesting is that God did not allow them to store this food – to keep it overnight or pack it away for times of shortage. If they tried to, it would spoil. Only one day were they allowed to keep it for a longer period, and that is on the Sabbath day, so that they would not have to work to gather it on that one day. Otherwise it was literally, hand to mouth, each new day.

I wonder how much stronger would be my faith if I had to live like this? That is, if I could see, each and every day, how my meal came to me not just buying it at the grocery store, not just gathering it from the refrigerator, but literally, picking it up off the ground and only being able to have one day's worth at a time.

I imagine that the Israelites got a little creative with the manna. Maybe they made ba-manna bread, or manna-cotti. Or many other ways. But they learned one thing from this experience: the reliability of God. He could be counted on, every day.

You and I – we have a tendency to credit ourselves for what we eat. It's because of our hard work, our industry, our diligence and our skill. We are prosperous because we are educated. There's food on our table because we made it happen. Perhaps Bart Simpson's Thanksgiving Prayer sums it up: "Dear God, we paid for this ourselves, so ...thanks for nothing."

None of us would actually say such a blasphemous thing, but deep down we like to give ourselves a pat on the back and rejoice in our ability to provide.

Would our attitude change if we could see our food come to us, like the Israelites did? If we picked it up off the ground, but could only pick up enough for each day?

And furthermore, I wonder how our attitude toward salvation would be if we could see, every day, the agonizing, bloody sacrifice of the Son of God on the cross, paying the price for the sins we just committed. Would we sin less if we could see the pain on Jesus' face, look at the stains of His blood, hear His cries for forgiveness when He deserves nothing less than glory but receives only pain?

I believe it is our challenge today, from this text, to see beyond the food – to see beyond the sanitized, empty cross on our altar, and to realize the depth of God's incredible love for us expressed to us each and every day in the food on our table and the forgiveness of our sins. I believe it is our challenge, every day, to see the Shepherd, who cares so much for us, that He goes above and beyond the call of duty and reaches down deep to be sure we are taken care of.

Do you see beyond the food? Do you see beyond the pretty cross? Does the loving Shepherd's image stare you in the face as you cut your meat, drink your water, and season your salad? Does the loving Shepherd's image beckon you to gratitude as you confess your sins and hear His absolution for the sake of Jesus Christ.

If you can see beyond the food – beyond the cross, then you know, I'm guessing, that it changes you. It transforms you from a people who think they're entitled to God's provision, to a people who realize that they have what they have and they are what they are solely by the grace and generosity of God.

And soon we realize that God is calling us not just to be a people who appreciate His kindness, but who take it upon ourselves to be His agents of provision to others less fortunate than ourselves.

Does your heart burn for the poor, for the hungry, for those, like that little boy, who must fend for the scraps. Does your heart burn for the unbeliever who knows not God's forgiveness and has no hope for the future?

Today's text calls us to see beyond – and to say to ourselves, “Lord, make me an instrument of your grace. Help me to see the responsibility I have to give from my bounty so that others too may know the Shepherds loving provision.”

Manna. “What is it?”

As you take your manna from the altar today and rejoice in God's forgiving grace the answer becomes plain. Manna is God's way of saying, “My God will supply all my needs according to His riches in Christ Jesus, and My God will help me to be a provider – that is to lift up my gifts and to share them with joy.”

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.