

Have You Had Your Manna Today?

by Staff

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One month after leaving Egypt, the children of Israel found they were rapidly running out of food! Every night more animals had to be slaughtered to feed millions of hungry mouths. They surely wondered how long they could go on like this.

God had them right where He wanted them. In their plight they should have turned to Him for sustenance and providence, but instead they complained and lost faith (Exodus 16:1-3). Many expressed their regret at leaving the fleshpots of Egypt.

Unfortunately, we are often no better. We work so hard to provide daily bread for ourselves that turning to God in faith to provide our needs as He sees fit becomes an afterthought. Jesus commands His people to seek *first* the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and then God will add to us all the things we worry about (Matthew 6:33). God certainly intends that we work, but not to the point of collapse or worry, as we try to provide what we think is so necessary to life.

In John 6:27, Jesus teaches we are not to labor for the "bread that perishes," yet we do. Over and over. He tells his audience verses 31-35 that manna is a type of what God is still doing today: making living Bread from heaven available if we will just go out, gather it and eat it day by day.

In His sample prayer, Jesus teaches us to ask, "Give us this day our *daily* bread." Though Jesus was no doubt including physical bread and physical needs, more often than not He was thinking spiritually. We also need to pray that God provide us our daily spiritual bread, the kind that leads to life, not the kind that perishes. "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4).

Jesus makes it very clear: Manna or "bread from heaven" was a type of Himself. "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35, 48), says He who was born in Bethlehem, which means "house of bread." Interesting, is it not? The One who is our daily bread began His life in a town whose name declares His role as the Head of a household that receives nourishing life from Him. The church of God is the real "house of bread," and Jesus is its Head. He came down as the true bread from God that we should be gathering and eating day by day (John 6:30-35, 48-51), as the Israelites depicted with the manna.

Do we think of Jesus as bread—our *daily* bread—other than at Passover? How is He bread? Why does He call Himself bread? Why does He use manna as the type of what He is for us today? How can we eat of Him day by day?

Bread and God's Word

Jesus is the Word of God (John 1:1-2). Perhaps we have envied the people of the early first century who literally walked, ate, talked and reasoned with Him. "If only Jesus could hear me today, and if only I could hear Him speak to me," we muse. But we do have access to His mind, His words, His thoughts, His advice *constantly* through His printed Word, the Bible. The Bible is the Word of God in print. Perhaps we could even say the Bible is Jesus in print!

When we get up early, read the Word of God and ponder its advice, we are in fact eating of the Word of God, of the bread from heaven. Have we capitalized on this? Do we *take advantage* of the fact that God's Word is more accessible to us in its myriad forms and translations—it is even on computer disks and the Internet!—than it ever has in all of human history?

Bread is often called "the staff of life." It is a basic food eaten in some form or another by virtually every culture around the world. The bread we eat literally becomes a part of our flesh. It helps us grow, puts flesh on our bones, and provides us with life. In the same way, Jesus, the bread from heaven, becomes a part of us. As we eat of His Word, we not only receive nourishment, but we grow and live by it. He becomes our life as we in turn become a part of Him, until we can finally say with Paul,

[I]t is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.
(Galatians 2:20)

When we come to our Master's table and eat the bread He places before us, His thoughts become our thoughts and His ways become our ways—in time, slowly but inexorably.

The Original Bread from Heaven

Please take the time to read Exodus 16 before continuing. The Israelites began complaining because they were running out of food, and their trek across the wilderness had just begun. So God had to reaffirm His providence, His sovereignty, His presence and His awareness to them by appearing in a dazzling display of cloud (Exodus 16:10-12). He also promised to provide them with quail that evening and a new food on a daily basis.

Notice that God provided it. No human explanation for this bread from heaven is acceptable. The next morning they awoke to find that a small seed-like food had appeared on the dew, as tiny as small, whitish seeds or bits of frost. Knowing nothing of it, they asked, "What is it?" *Manna* means "what is it?"

Remember Jesus said He is the *true* bread of life, and He was not recognized for what He was either. The world looks even at the Word of God—the Bible—and asks, "What is it?" not recognizing its eternal value or Source. God, and the things of God, have to be spiritually revealed and discerned (I Corinthians 2:14).

So God explains manna to the children of Israel. He tells them what it is, when and how much to gather, and who in each household is responsible for gathering it. The principles apply equally to the Word of God, the true bread.

The head of house was responsible for ensuring that his family, or "those within his tent," collected enough manna for their daily needs (verse 16). From this we can conclude that men, primarily fathers, should oversee their families' spiritual nourishment. Israelitish fathers probably took the family out with them to gather the manna each morning. The children soon learned that their lives depended on their willingness to collect what was freely available. God provided the food, but the people had to gather, cook and eat it.

Nothing has changed. God still provides the spiritual food today in the form of His readily accessible Word. We modern-day Israelites, however, must be willing to get up, crack open the pages of our Bibles and eat of this bread from heaven, or it will do us no good whatsoever!

God still charges the fathers with the responsibility of helping their children eat of His Word. Fathers should help their children to pray, read the Bible and understand God's words in ways they can grasp. Stories should be geared to a child's level and made interesting to him. In the wilderness, manna was undoubtedly prepared differently for a baby from what an adult ate. The lessons are there for us today.

Many Spiritual Types

Other interesting points come to light in Exodus 16:16-18. The recommended daily amount per person was an omer (about a large bowlful or two quarts). In the same way, ministers often recommend a certain amount of daily Bible study as a guideline. This guideline serves as a motivator to help a person study God's Word, which in the end is the important thing.

Of the Israelites the Bible says that those who gathered little did not lack, and those who gathered much did not have any wasted. In the same way, some days even just a verse or two carefully pondered is adequate to sustain us for that day. It could be exactly the thought we need. On the other hand, an intensive three-hour Bible study session does not leave us feeling we have overfed. You cannot overindulge on God's Word. Nor does a long session today eliminate the absolute need for fresh Bible study tomorrow! The Israelites could not store the manna over from day to day, as it would breed worms (verses 19-20). God made sure they went out *every* day for their manna to teach us we need to study the Bible fresh *every* day.

No wonder Jesus teaches us to pray, "Give us this day our *daily* bread" (Matthew 6:11). The same is true physically: We can gorge ourselves one day and still need to eat the next. God wants us to learn from the physical here: A hearty feeding on God's Word over the Sabbath, for example, is simply not enough to last the whole week. The very next day, and each day thereafter, we must gather fresh manna and eat it.

The only exception is the Sabbath (Exodus 16:22-26). We are not to earn or work for our physical bread on the Sabbath, and even considering this spiritually, it is often true that we have less time to do intensive personal study on the Sabbath. Yet God still feeds us His Word, does He not? We are fed by the sermonette, sermon, songs and fellowship at church!

The Israelites certainly became very familiar with manna over those 40 years; they found scores of ways to knead, combine, prepare and cook it (Numbers 11:7-8). Are we becoming as intimately familiar with the Word of God? Spiritual manna is a live food. It can be prepared various ways, perfect to the spiritual needs of the hearer.

In the same way, we can read God's Word today—maybe the very same verses we studied just yesterday—and get something altogether new out of it. It is vibrant, alive and life-giving. If we are not careful, though, we can take it for granted and grow tired of it, as Israel did once influenced by the complaints of the mixed multitude (Numbers 11:4-6).

The Israelites ate manna for the entire 40 years of their time of testing in the wilderness. The lesson for us as we seek our Promised Land is that throughout our time of testing, we cannot let a day go by

when we do not ingest God's Word. This also teaches we do not need a wide variety of spiritual sources to be spiritually well-nourished. Israel's only source of manna was God Himself.

When did the Israelites gather manna? Exodus 16:21 shows that they had to gather their daily bread *first* thing in the morning, before the sun got hot, or their opportunity literally melted away. God's bread is best gathered early in the day, when we first arise, when we and the manna are at its freshest. This sounds like "seek *first* the kingdom of God. . ."! Sometimes, we intend to study later in the day, or in the evening, and what happens? Other things interfere and crowd out the Word of God—and an opportunity to show God He has first place in our life simply melts away, just like manna allowed to sit in the heat of the sun.

In this regard, fathers and mothers should teach their children by example to help them learn this habit. Teach them that the best time to study and pray is right after waking up. Ask them to make their beds and immediately kneel to talk to and worship their Father in heaven.

None of this works unless we get up in time to put God first, and that will not happen unless we go to bed early enough! To show God we are serious about putting Him first in our lives, perhaps we need to quit doing the things that eat up our time. *God will not just slide into first place. We must consciously put Him there.* We must make this decision every day of our lives. God will not accept second or third place in our lives.

The Value of God's Manna

Manna sustained Israel; it gave them life—even the strength to fight battles when necessary. Asking God to bless our physical food so that it gives us the strength to perform our daily activities is a normal part of a prayer before a meal. Should we not do the same before partaking of a spiritual meal? Ask God to bless the day's Bible study. Implore Him to speak personally in the words about to be read. Request a pliable, humble and teachable spirit as *He* teaches His will, thoughts, ways and attitudes. And be sure to thank Him for providing another day of the best and perfect food, Jesus Christ in print. Some may benefit from using a Bible study notebook to record the thoughts and instruction God provides during these spiritual meals. It can be a sort of diary of what God says to you each day.

Health and personal spending experts warn their clients never to go grocery shopping when hungry. Studies show that people buy more compulsively and more junk food when they are running on empty. The same is true spiritually. When we are *full* of God's Word, day by day, we will not be so easily tempted by false spiritual foods, and we will have the joy of right living more often!

David discovered this too, as he writes in Psalm 119:9-11:

How can a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed according to your word. With my whole heart I have sought You; oh, let me not wander from your commandments!
Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You.

If we fill our hearts with God's words, we can only speak and think godly things, "[f]or out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matthew 12:34).

Besides this, when we are tempted, the Word of God becomes our sword of the Spirit with which to fight those temptations (Ephesians 6:17). The "armor of God" has only one offensive weapon: God's Word!

Jesus Christ sets the example of how to use "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." Every time Satan tries to tempt Him, He responds with a quotation from the Bible. His every answer begins with "It is written . . ." (Matthew 4:1-11). We can become just as adept at using this sword if we use it daily. If we fill our hearts with His words, our speech can reflect what Jesus would say, but if God's words are not in our hearts, how can our mouths speak accurately and automatically of godly things?

Though this mixes the metaphors, sword and manna, both illustrate the need to be familiar with the Word of God. We can use the sword effectively if we fill our hearts with the bread from heaven, God's Word, the spiritual manna God provides us each day.

If we overcome by the strength of the spiritual manna, we will someday eat of the "hidden manna" (Revelation 2:17). As a perpetual reminder of how He took care of them in the wilderness for 40 years, God commanded Moses and Aaron to save some manna in a golden pot placed inside the Ark of the Covenant. The lid of the Ark represents the mercy seat of God's throne. Since Jesus Christ fulfills the type of the manna, this pictures the reward of those who eat and use God's bread every day. A time is coming when they will be one with Christ on His throne, working intimately with Him in the innermost part of His Temple. It pictures us receiving Christ in a very close and rewarding relationship for all eternity, as we feed forever on the empowering and encouraging words of our soon-coming King.

Now is the time to start a new habit of rising early and gathering spiritual manna before the sun is hot. Open up the Bible every morning, hear God speak and take note of His counsel. It is readily available, free, abundant and life-giving. We just have to avail ourselves of it. Take and eat of it every day—we can eat our fill of the living bread from heaven!