

# The Miracle of Manna

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The Miracle of Manna: Exodus 16:1-21

Fresh Every Morning

The Israelites had come to Marah, a place in the wilderness of Shur, three days' journey from the triumph of the Red Sea. **We have learned that Marah means place of bitterness, and we have looked at it not only as a geographical location but as a place on the life-map of each of us.**

The water at Marah was bitter. The people were unable to drink it, and they murmured against Moses, because their thirst was overwhelming. Again God intervened. He gave Moses a tree to throw into the water, and instantly the water became sweet.

It's interesting to note that the next stop in the wandering of the Israelites was at Elim. At Elim, there were twelve springs of water, and seventy palm trees. **It was a welcome resting place after the difficult days in the wilderness.** E B. Meyer once suggested that God does not multiply our Elims, for He cannot trust us there: "He gems the earth with them, to teach us that it is not all blasted, and that we are not a cursed race in a cursed world. He sets them before our eyes as witnesses that there are worlds where there is no bitterness in the fountains of life. He causes us to lie down in them, only that we may be better able to tread in the paths of righteousness in which He leads us."

It is my observation that the Lord never allows us to linger too long in Elim. **He summons us to go forth, and our going forth sometimes takes us into the desert.** Our journey really is a pilgrim's journey. Now and then we may rest in Elim, but we can't pitch our tent for a long season there. **In our lives, there will appear a cloud by day and a light by night which is God's summons for us to move on.**

The Israelites moved away from Elim, led by the Lord, traveling along the brink of the Red Sea, through the wilderness of Sin. Though that's the name of the wilderness, it also indicates the state of their souls. **As they got into the wilderness, again they showed themselves for what they were—faithless people who had not yet learned to trust the Lord.**

Within a month the Hebrews forgot the Red Sea. They had struck their tumbrels' and sung their lyrics of praise there in their triumph over Pharaoh as they looked back and saw his army drowned on the seashore—but now, they were hungry. Though God had delivered them out of the bony hands of death, they could not believe that He could satisfy today's hunger.

**Unbelief has a short memory, and discontent perverts our perspective.** The Hebrews began to wish for the fleshpots of Egypt. They could remember and savor in their minds the security of food and shelter and clothing that they had had back in Egypt, **but they had forgotten their affliction—the affliction of slavery.**

**Isn't this a picture of human nature?** When the Hebrews were back in Egypt, they cried out in their oppression and were ready to give up everything for liberty. **Yet when they got liberty, they were ready to put their necks back in the yoke again in order that their stomachs might be filled.** Alexander Maclaren put it well: "**Men do not know how happy they are until they cease to be so. Our present miseries and our past blessings are the themes on which unbelief harps. Let him that is without similar sin cast the first stone at those grumbling Israelites.**"

So as the Israelites moved into the wilderness away from the Red Sea, it was a toilsome journey. They had been threatened by thirst and now they were facing famine. Again, Moses and Aaron were assailed by the anger of the people. But then came the miracle of the manna, which is the focus of this chapter: "*Then the LORD said to Moses, "Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you. And the people shall go out and gather a certain quota every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in My law or not"* (v. 4). Here was a distinct act of God, a supreme act of grace.

Let's look from three angles at this mighty act of God, this miracle of the manna. Let's see it (1) as a token, (2) as a test, and (3) as a truth.

### ***A Token***

If you want a picture of the Israelites, you will find it in the Scripture's continuous reference to their murmurings. *They were constantly complaining; their faith was shallow; their trust was superficial; they were selfish, their stomachs prevailing over their minds and hearts.* **What a token of the Lord's loving patience and long-suffering grace is provided in this picture.** No doubt the hearts of the Hebrews would quake when they were **summoned to hear the voice of God—and His voice would ring out, "I have heard your moaning, I know your affliction, and I hear your murmuring."**

And how they must have trembled in their souls, how wide-eyed must have been their amazement when the glory of God flashed above them in a Shekinah cloud by day and a burning fire by night, guiding them on in their journey. But, here the message is different, for here the heart of God is clearly revealed. It comes in the sweet gentleness of the Lord as He promises manna because they have murmured about their hunger and have complained against Moses and God. So, in order that they may know He is the Lord, He performs the miracle of manna.

**I can't help seeing in this picture a mother soothing her crying infant by feeding it from her own breast. You see, it would have been easy for God to take the rod to His crying children, but rather He sought to win them by His loving patience and His long-suffering love. He answered their whimpering unbelief and their sneering complaints with an expression of love.**

We find the same expression in a story about Joy Davidman, a brilliant writer, who, at the time of her death, was the wife of C. S. Lewis. She was raised by parents who were militant nonbelievers. She graduated with top honors from Hunter College and began her adult life with a kind of cynical sophistication and skepticism that expects the worst and believes the least. She disdained religion and morality. In her arrogant, intellectual pride, she conceived of them as havens for the neurotic, ideas on which only the untutored would depend. Peak experiences of poetic insight were dismissed as some glandular disturbance that science would in time explain.

Then one day her husband, who had been growing more and more depressed, called from another city and told her that he was losing his mind, that life no longer mattered to him, and then sent her into shock and despair by abruptly hanging up and saying no more. Joy Davidman was in the country with her children. She didn't know where her husband was in the city, so she was desperate, hopeless. All she could do was telephone some friends in the city to help, and then wait in quiet desperation and despair.

**Then something happened. In her words, "There was another person with me in the room—a presence so real that all my previous life was by comparison mere shadow play. . . . I think I must have been the world's most astonished atheist. My awareness of Christ's presence was not conjured up to bolster me about my husband. No, it was terror—terror, and ecstasy, repentance and rebirth."**

Even in the life of a supposed atheist, as in the life of whimpering unbelievers whom God had chosen to be in covenant with Him, God works with loving patience and long-suffering grace to reveal Himself as the One who cares for each one of us, who is concerned about our coming out and our going in, who notes the fall of a sparrow. We can see that in this miracle of manna, a token of God's loving patience and long-suffering grace.

### **A Test**

The second angle from which we see the miracle of manna is that of a test. *"That I may test them, whether they walk in My law or not"* (v. 4).

**How did the manna become a test? It became a test because it was given daily, and only enough of it for the day's needs could be gathered.**

What lessons are here! The overarching one, suggested by the title of this chapter, is that **God's provisions are fresh every morning. The manna as a test teaches us about *habitual* dependence.** God could have provided it once; He could have given the Israelites everything they needed for their wilderness wandering. But He didn't. **He gave them only enough for the day.** *"So they gathered it every morning, every man according to his need. And when the sun became hot, it melted"* (v. 21).

**Jesus was telling us the same thing when He taught us to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread." So, the gift of the manna was a continual training, and therefore a continual test of faith—disciplining us to be habitually dependent upon the Lord.**

**I believe that the Lord, joyful in His giving, gives because "infinite love loves infinitely to be loved."** Have you ever thought of God in that fashion? **He loves because He loves to be loved.** The ongoing expressions of His love call forth our love, and that makes the heart of God happy. That's a part of the reason He provides for us "fresh every morning." **He does it for His own sake. But more, He does it for our sakes, that we may know the peace and strength that come from continual dependence upon Him, the joyful life that is ours when we trust Him and see the truth of our trusting.**

**The happiest people I know are not people who don't have any needs, but people who experience the meeting of their needs by God.** That happened to a single parent I know. Left alone to rear her children, she had just taken a new job and had been working only one month when she became ill. With no sick leave and no savings, she was in crisis to be without income for two weeks. I wish you could have seen her face when a preacher friend of mine gave her \$250. "It's manna from heaven," she said. "The Lord provides."

Now I know that woman's commitment, and this was no pious response to momentary relief. She lives daily in dependence upon God. She works hard and prays earnestly. She spends herself for her children and for others. Hers is a tough lot—not just where money is concerned, but also in the daily pressure of rearing three children, the daily pain of loneliness for a young woman without a marriage partner, the temptations of singleness, and the moral pressures. But she's happy. Her face radiates a sort of transparent joy. I hardly ever see her without thinking of Jesus' first beatitude: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." No wonder Jesus put that one first. The poor in spirit are those who know they are dependent upon God, and they are the happy ones. Have you noticed it? The happiest people I know are not those who have no needs, but those people who experience having their needs met by God.

There's another category of happy people I know. They're the ones who seem to have been extravagantly blessed with material resources, but know that what they have is indeed a blessing—a gift. It could be gone tomorrow, and so they accept it as manna, "fresh every morning."

The \$250 he gave to the woman who is happy in her dependence upon God is a good example of such "manna." The Christmas before, a man gave him \$6,000 and told him to use it to be a blessing for people as he saw fit. He put it into what I call an Agape Fund, and he uses it as the giver asked him to use it. This generous man is not wealthy. He tithes to the church, and this money was over and above—probably equal to—his tithe. It was his way of expressing his gratitude, of saying that what he has is a gift and that he, too, is dependent upon the Lord.

So, that's one big lesson as we look at the miracle of manna as a test. It teaches us about habitual dependence.

**There's another lesson in this test. It is the vivid reminder that there are some things that we cannot store up for tomorrow. Yesterday's manna cannot be used as food for today.** It cannot be hoarded. It is there in the "morning, and we can use it until evening; but tomorrow we'll have to gather it again. There is no laying in of a supply, then sleeping late the rest of the week. Some things are a day-to-day affair.

Love in the family is like that. Oh, I know that love is half history and half intuition, that there is power in ritual and memory, that we gain strength from the residual experience of love. But **I also know that expressions of love, keeping love powerfully alive in our families and in other relationships, is a "daily manna" affair.** We have to make it fresh every morning. I recently talked to a man who lost his wife about a month ago. He was sharing his heart-tearing pain. He said something I've never heard before: "I know the pain will lessen. Everybody tells me it will. But I'm not sure I want it to. The lessening of the pain will mean distance from the love."

When we think about it, we know what he is feeling—the loss of a love that is fresh every morning. That ought to teach us something. Don't think you can store up love. Love must be kept alive in word and deed daily. It must be fresh every morning. Marriages fail because we don't give attention to this. Children are not nurtured to love, because we don't give attention to this. Children grow up unable to be the marriage partners and the parents they need to be, because we do not see love in the family as daily manna which we gather and share together.

We could catalog a number of things that cannot be gathered in advance and stored up for tomorrow: democracy, education, character. Think about it. **Character is on trial every day.** Even civilization and culture are tenuous; they must be attended to every day. Arnold Toynbee, the eminent historian, reminds us that **"the jungle, like a beast, waits to spring on a careless civilization."**

Let's focus particularly on one other way in which the Christian faith is a daily manna affair. When we come to Christian experience, yesterday's manna won't keep. As the veteran housemaid told the young bride: "Child, housework won't get you if you make up your mind in advance that you're not going to get caught up. Anytime you look around and think things look nice, just remember that even when you're gloating', sheets are wrinkling', dust is settling', and stomachs are getting ready all over again."

**Though homespun, that's an apt warning for the soul. Faith can't coast. It's a daily thing. With faith, as with housework, we need to make up our minds that we're never going to get caught up.**

**Think about that in terms of God's forgiveness.** Last month's forgiveness—even yesterday's forgiveness—is inadequate for today. **We can't store up forgiveness.** Forgiveness must be appropriated for every sin of our life. I remember an experience I had following a preaching service. A woman at least seventy years old asked for an appointment. When we met, she told me a very sad story. Many years before, she and her husband had had a dog that had bitten a little child, tearing up his face and disfiguring him for life. This couple was sued by the parents of the child. A court trial took place. On the stand, this woman had been asked whether the dog ever frightened other people by growling at them and threatening to bite them. The lawyer, according to this woman, short-circuited her response, and she felt that she had not been able to tell the whole truth. She had been plagued by guilt ever since, because she had felt through these years that she had lied on the stand. She was in a quandary as to what she should do. Should she contact the lawyer again? Should she seek the family and make amends? Should she send the family a check? Should she leave something in her will to that little boy? Though the incident had taken place at least twenty years before, the burden of guilt was devastating her life.

**An overall blanket of forgiveness is not extended to us by God. Forgiveness must be fresh every morning.** It has to be appropriated for every sin, every shortcoming of life. **Manna as a test teaches us habitual dependence on God, that there are some things in life we can't store up for tomorrow. Yesterday's manna can't be used as food today.**

### ***A Truth***

The third angle from which we want to look at our Scripture is that the miracle of **manna is given by God for a truth.** In miraculous and transient form, **the manna speaks God's eternal word.** The God who sent manna sends our daily bread and we are dependent upon Him. That daily bread cannot be stored up and hoarded. It is fresh every morning. But equally deep in the meaning of this truth is the explanation Jesus gave in His wilderness hunger: **"It is written [Deut. 8:3], "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD" (Matt. 4:4).** *God humbled the Israelites, suffered them to be hungry and fed them manna, that He might make them know that man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.*

Some commentators make much of the manna's being a *natural* product of the land. Although the provision of food included both quail and manna, only ten words are given to the quail. Scripture is full of reference to manna, in this account and elsewhere. The Hebrew word actually translates as, "What is it?" Some scholars have pointed out that several desert plants, notably the tamarisk tree, exude a sweet sticky substance that drips to the ground, turns white as it crystallizes, and tastes like honey. Others believe that it is the excretion of certain insects. (The substance is still called *mann* by Arabs living in the region.)

I agree with Alexander Maclaren:

No doubt, we are to recognize in the plagues of Egypt, and in the dividing of the Red Sea, the extraordinary action of ordinary causes; and there is no objection in principle to doing so here. But that manna is an exudation from the bark of a shrub, seems a singular (natural) "substratum" on which to build the feeding of two millions of people, more or less exclusively and continuously for forty years. . . . Whether we admit connection between the two, or not, the miraculous character of the manna of the Israelites is unaffected. It was miraculous in its origin—"rained from heaven," in its quantity, in its observance of times and seasons, in its putrefaction and preservation—as rotting when kept for greed, and remaining sweet and preserved for the Sabbath. It came straight from the creative will of God, and whether its name means "What is it?" or "It is a gift," the designation is equally true and appropriate, pointing in one case, to the mystery of its nature; in the other, to the love of the Giver, and in both referring it directly to the hand of God.

**There is a deeper truth yet. The manna in the wilderness is also a "type" of Christ.** Throughout the Old Testament, but especially in the Book of Exodus, types are used to express eternal truth. The whole Exodus journey is a type of the Christian's pilgrimage. Here we come to a magnificent expression of truth in a type—the manna being a type of Christ.

This is a type that was claimed by Jesus Himself. You no doubt remember the story of the feeding of the 5,000 in the sixth chapter of John's Gospel. But do you remember what followed that? Crowds of people followed Jesus across the Sea of Galilee. Jesus confronted them with the shallowness of their curiosity. "You seek me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate the fill of the loaves, ( John 6:27).

Still, the truth had not come through clearly to them, and they asked, "What sign do you do that we may see, and believe you? What work do you perform? Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, "He gave them bread from heaven to eat" (v. 31,).

Listen to Jesus' revealing word: "Most assuredly, I say to you, Moses did not give you the bread from heaven, but My Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world" (w. 32-33).

Their spiritual appetites had been whetted, and they said, "Lord, give us this bread always." And then came Jesus' remarkable and revealing claim, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst" (v. 35).

The Jews couldn't take that; they couldn't appropriate that truth. It was too much for them. They couldn't see the connection between the bread they had eaten on the mountaintop that had fed their gnawing hunger and Jesus' claim to be the Bread of Life. So, what did they do? It's interesting. Verse 41 of the sixth chapter says: "[The Jews then complained against Him.](#)" [Does that take you back to the wilderness—to the complaining of the unfaithful, of those who can see only as their stomachs fill?](#) "The Jews then murmured at Him, because He said, I am the bread which came down from heaven.'" The story continues:

And they said, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How is it then that He says, I have come down from heaven'?" Jesus therefore answered and said to them, "Do not murmur among yourselves. No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Therefore everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to Me. Not that anyone has seen the Father, except He who is from God; He has seen the Father. Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life. I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven, If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world." (John 6:42-51)

The Jews continued to murmur among themselves as to how it could be that He was the Bread of Life. Jesus again responded to them and gave us the truth of what we celebrate in Holy Communion. The argued among themselves, "How can this man give us His flesh to eat?"

Then Jesus said to them, "Most assuredly I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him. As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who feeds on Me will live because of Me. This is the bread which came down from heaven—not as your fathers ate the manna, and are dead. He who eats this bread will live forever." (John 6:53-58)

**The manna as a type of Christ shows us that through Jesus Christ God provides for our deepest needs—daily. This provision of God in Jesus Christ is a *satisfying* provision. It is the only thing that will satisfy our eternal need. It is a *sufficient* provision. It is the only thing that can give us the salvation we desperately cry for. It is a *sustaining* provision—sustaining not only today and every day, but sustaining for eternity. "He who eats this bread will live forever."**

A man in prison wrote to author Robert A. Raines. He described his setting. "There's a high chain-link fence below my second-story window, and on the top of the fence, there are huge coils of barbed wire. A dozen or so little sparrows were flitting about in the barbed wire, and they reminded me of that scriptural verse about God caring even for the sparrow that falls." This man shared with Dr. Raines a poem he had written about the satisfying, sufficient, sustaining provision of God. Though it's not great poetry, it expresses deep faith and great hope.

My prison house is cold and gray  
And made of rock and steel.  
It's filled with tears both night and day,  
There's little love to feel.  
The sick and sad and broken men  
Who suffer here with me  
Cannot recall the joys of when  
They last were gay and free.  
Yet I am happy and I'm free  
Though tombed within this Hell,  
For mighty acts of God I see  
Through cold bars of my cell.  
For sparrows play outside my wall  
And flit from fence to tree  
I know He grieves their every fall  
And He is here with me.<sup>4</sup>

If a prisoner can feel God's providential care in a cold stone tomb cell behind barbed wire, can we find it and feel it where we are today?

## **Manna for the Sabbath (Exodus 16:22-36)**

Here is the earliest passage in the Old Testament that mentions the Sabbath day. Obviously, the Sabbath was already observed in Israel before it became one of the Ten Commandments.

Moses instructed the people to gather enough manna on the sixth day to feed them also on the seventh, because no manna was to be gathered then. The people who did as Moses commanded discovered another miracle. Whereas on other days when they had tried to hoard for tomorrow, the manna spoiled, this was not so with the manna gathered for the Sabbath.

Others were slow to believe. But when they went out on the Sabbath to get their daily manna, it was as Moses had told them. There was no manna.

At the conclusion of this chapter of Exodus, the experience of the provision of God was tangibly memorialized. An *omer* (twenty-four dry quarts) of manna was placed in a jar and kept as a testimony of God's provision for the needs of His people. This omer of manna was a reminder to the Israelites of the meaning of the experience: a token, a testing, and a truth—a time of discipline. That's the way Deuteronomy interpreted it. "So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD" (Deut. 8:3). And much later, as already indicated, Jesus responded to the manna experience with His claim to be the "true bread which came down from heaven."

In time, this testimony, this omer of manna, would be in the tabernacle with Israel's holiest and most treasured objects. It would be the mute but telling reminder to all generations of the grace by which Israel was so marvelously nurtured. It would remind Israel that she was who she is because of what she was, alive as a people *now* because of God's sustaining grace.

Let us remember that the Sabbaths of our lives also should be living reminders of this grace.

