

### ***Wonder Bread***

In the name of him whose body *is* our Bread of Life from heaven, dear friends in Christ: We're back in the desert with our traveling companions, the Children of Israel so recently liberated from their bondage in Egypt. They've faced a few tough situations, but the Lord has seen them through. The first was at the Red Sea when it appeared that the Pharaoh's army would destroy them and then take the remaining survivors back to serve them as slaves again. But we saw how the Lord opened a pathway for them through the sea and then drowned their pursuers when the water returned to its place. Then last week we heard how they dealt with two different critical water shortages: one at the bitter spring of Marah and the other at their waterless camp near the rock of Horeb. In both cases the Lord came to the rescue by miraculously providing water for his thirsting people.

This evening it's another critical shortage that they face. Six weeks have passed since their departure from Egypt. Before they left, they prepared unleavened bread for the journey; kind of like crackers. But that supply has run out. And sadly, the people haven't yet learned one of the most important lessons they were supposed to have learned when the water ran out: namely, if you need something, ask the Lord who's leading the way. He's right there, visible, in the cloud or the pillar of fire. But no, that would be too easy – and imply some level of trust in the Lord, which they haven't got; so instead they start to grumble.

It begins with a low rumble, people talking under their breath to those around them; but not to the leadership. "I sure am hungry." "Yeah, me too. I wish we had something to eat." "My kids are crying to me because their bellies are empty." "Rawawah." "Rawawah." It keeps building, the complaints feeding on each other into this growing crescendo. By the time it comes out in the open and they bring their complaint to Moses and Aaron it's a moan of despair that sounds absurd: "Oh, if only the Lord had slaughtered us all in Egypt! Better to die there where life was so good for us. We did nothing but lounge around all day beside massive stew pots full of luscious meat and gorge ourselves on bread in abundance. But no, you, Moses and Aaron, have brought us out here to starve to death. Oh, it's cruel, cruel world."

Lest we cast stones, this merely illustrates the tendency we *all* have to think that whatever problem we're dealing with at the present is the worst crisis ever. Did someone say, "coronavirus"? Note too how under stress their view of the past is so seriously distorted. They never sat around lounging in Egypt; they were slaves under cruel taskmasters who put them to hard labor. Pots full of meat? For slaves? Not a chance. Maybe a small taste of it on *extremely* rare occasions. And bread in abundance? Not likely, instead meager rations that never made their gnawing hunger go away. Even in the best of times they were severely undernourished.

But I need to say a word on how important bread was to the people of the ancient near east. It was their *staple* food, something we really have no concept of. We can go to the grocery whenever we want and buy as much as we want of whatever we want. Every food item you can think of is always available, and for a reasonable price. Not so in those days. The options were extremely limited and available only in short seasons. The one thing you always ate was bread. If times were good and food was abundant, then you might get three meals a day: for breakfast one (or maybe a part of one) of those flat loaves of pita bread, bread for the main meal at noon with *maybe* some lentil stew or yogurt or olive paste to dip it in, and then

bread again for supper. On rare special occasions the noon meal might include a bit of meat or fish. And all of this is only if times were good. In tough times, you'd be missing one or more of those meals each day. And in really tough times, you might go days without eating. The point is bread that was what you lived on. That's why the Hebrews called it "lechem" which means "for life". Actually it's plural so "for lives". If we have it, we live. Without it, we die.

The other thing that needs to be said about bread is how labor intensive it is to produce. Think about all the plowing, sowing, irrigating, cutting, gathering, hauling, threshing, storing, grinding into flour, and finally making the dough which you then bake in a wood fire oven which means adding the labor of constantly having to gather and cut firewood. Tons of work. And mind you, we're talking about doing this all by hand without the aid of modern machinery, methods, or tools. And also without the benefit of modern high yield seed that is resistant to drought and disease. Nor has anyone heard of pesticide. You plant the seed and hope that the conditions are right so it grows to fruition *without* being eaten by locusts or destroyed by hail or stolen or burned up by your enemies. *If* everything turns out right and you manage to harvest and store some grain, you still have to worry about the rats getting into it, or that the barn leaks and it gets wet and is ruined by mold. At any step in the process so many things can go wrong and waste all your hard work. And then you go hungry, maybe even starve to death.

All of this is part of the curse that the Lord put on creation when our first parents fell into sin. Recall what the Lord said to Adam, "By the sweat of your face you will eat your bread – that is, your 'for life'; but all that work for you to live won't get you anywhere. Because you'll work hard to live until the end when you die and return to the ground, for out of it you were taken." The Lord meant all this work to teach the truth that man can't save himself. All his work to live gets him nowhere in the end. No matter how much effort you put into it, you cannot save your life. Your work ends in death. Every time. No exceptions.

But now the Lord, in response to his peoples' grumbling against Moses – but really, against him – promises to act. He tells Moses, "Say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread. Then you shall know that I am the LORD your God.'" And because the Lord said it, it happens. Near sunset huge flocks of plump quail descend upon their camp. These people have never seen such a bounty. Soon the smell of roasting fowl is making everyone's mouth water. And a bit later, for the first time in their lives, the people know what it means to eat and be satisfied – to actually have enough in order to not still feel hungry. And then, in the morning, they wake to discover the ground covered with a thick layer of a white seed-like substance. I'd say that it looks to them like it snowed; but these people have lived in Egypt all their lives and have never seen snow. They are baffled. "What is it?" they ask, which in Hebrew is "Manna?" Moses answers them, "It is the bread – the for life – the Lord has *given* you to eat."

Amazing. Here's bread that you don't have to work for. God just gives it to you. All you do is take it and eat it. (Huh ... "take and eat"; that reminds me of something else.) But you see what's going on here is an undoing of the curse on creation. It's like we're back in the garden with all this fruit the Lord has prepared hanging around. Hungry? Just reach out your hand and pick whatever you like. Take as much as you want. But this isn't fruit. It's bread. It's for life.

Moses instructs the people to scoop up what they need of it for the day; but no more than that. The Lord is teaching them to trust. Tomorrow morning there will be more. And the day after that too. Every day until your journey is done. Trust me. But lots of folks don't trust the Lord. They are used to being short supplied. They greedily scoop up huge baskets full thinking they need to stock up while there's still plenty lying around. It doesn't work. In the

morning they discover that what they thought they had so cleverly saved reeks and is full of crawling maggots.

This manna, as the Israelites call it, has some interesting properties. I recall from my childhood a certain product called "Wonder Bread". Its makers advertised that it helped build growing bodies ten ways. My personal belief is that the only wonder is that they were allowed to call it bread. Mushy, tasteless ... Bleah. Anyway, this manna is truly a wonder bread. Tastes great, full of nutrients (I'm guessing the Lord provided all the necessary vitamins and minerals), versatile – there's a passage in the book of Numbers that describes the various creative ways Israelite mothers came up with to prepare it, and *this* strange property: if you gather it up in your basket, it keeps for the day. But if it stays on the ground, by ten or eleven o'clock, it evaporates. It's gone. As we heard, if you try to store it overnight, it rots – except on Fridays. Friday's supply lasts through Saturday because the Lord doesn't want anyone working that day; not that there's a lot of work involved in scooping up manna, but even *that* little bit is more work than he wants his people to do on the Sabbath.

What's really intriguing about this is that the Lord has not yet given his people the commandment about keeping the Sabbath. That's weeks away when they get to Mt. Sinai. So, the first mention of the Sabbath, the day of rest, comes in the context of the Lord giving his people bread to eat. The message is simple: you rest. I will feed you. I'll do the work. I'll take care of you. Trust me. Trust me to give you what you need for your life: your life today, your life tomorrow, your life every day after that ... I've got you.

This is pure Gospel; but it's only a foreshadow of the full Gospel that Jesus reveals in his Bread of Life discourse, a portion of which we read earlier. Remember who Jesus is talking to. It's the day after he fed the 5000 in the wilderness. He pulled a Moses out there, giving the people bread to eat that they didn't have to work for. Jesus just gave it to them. They have followed him back to Capernaum where they expect him to feed them again. Give us more of this bread that we don't have to work for, they demand. Jesus tells them that they're asking for the wrong thing. The bread he gave them the day before was like the manna in the desert. It was life for the people; but only for this life, only for today. Jesus is here with a much bigger agenda. He's here to give his people life for eternity. That takes a different kind of bread. It's his body given for the life of the world on the cross, his body in which he did all the work to give life to dying sinners. This wondrous bread is like the fruit of the Tree of Life in the garden. Take, eat, and live forever. This bread is the fruit of his cross. It really is Wonder Bread. But you may recall that his hearers grumbled about it. They didn't want that bread. They only wanted the earthly stuff. And when he wouldn't give it to them, insisting that he had something better, they rejected and left him. May the Lord give us to hold fast in trust to the truth they refused, and may this be our daily prayer: Bread of Heaven, feed me till I want no more. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***