

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, February 25, 1990, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

EXODUS 16:14,15

“And when the dew had gone up, there was on the face of the wilderness a fine, flake-like thing, fine as hoarfrost on the ground. When the people of Israel saw it, they said to one another, ‘What is it?’ For they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them, ‘It is the bread which the Lord has given you to eat.’”

THE MESSAGE OF THE MANNA

Stand with me for a moment on a bare, bleak, mid-Eastern desert. The first faint rays of the rising sun have tinted the Eastern fringe of the desert a pale pink; and in the dim, uncertain light, thousands of men and women, clad in the white, flowing robes of the Orient, are moving over the sands, and their eyes are glued to the ground. They appear to be searching for some treasure that has been lost. With every couple of steps, a man stoops down, picks up a small white lump from the sand, and examines it with intense curiosity. People gather in little clusters to discuss this strange discovery, and in their Hebrew tongue, they ask one another, “Man-hu? Manhu?” — “What is it? What is it?”

And just because nobody knew what it was, just because nobody could explain it, or give it a name, they took the question they had all asked, and perhaps laughingly, they made of their question a name for this new, mysterious, wonderful food which God had sent them. And so they spoke of the manna as “the—what—is—it?” !! “Man—hu” they asked. ‘What is it?’ “Manna,” they called it; manna—manna!

We all know why the manna was sent. It was sent to save the Israelites from starving to death during their wilderness pilgrimage. They didn’t know what it was, but that did not prevent them from feeding upon it for their physical salvation. Here is a truth that should remind us that we don’t have to understand God’s blessings completely before we begin to appropriate and use them.

For example, there is much in the Bible that I don’t yet understand. But thank God, we can all go to Holy Scripture, to read and feed upon it for the enlightenment of our minds and for the salvation and nurture of our souls. Similarly, we don’t understand the profound spiritual laws relating to prayer; but that does not prevent us from coming to God on our knees, to receive the guidance and strength which He is willing to supply to the suppliant soul. Again, there are many theories of the Atonement—many views concerning what Jesus actually accomplished when He died for us on the Cross. But we don’t need to be conversant with these abstruse theories before we kneel in penitence and faith before that Cross, and feel the burden of our sins roll away.

An Old Testament story can often illustrate vividly a New Testament truth of deep spiritual significance and value. And I believe that the manna which God provided for His chosen people during their wilderness wanderings is a token of that tender, redeeming love of

God which is also symbolized in the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper.

Manna provided salvation from physical death; without it, God's people would have died of starvation. The bread and the wine symbolize salvation from spiritual death, through the broken body and shed blood of our Savior.

The manna in the wilderness, which the Psalmist calls "the grain of heaven" and "the bread of the angels" (Psalm 78:24,25), speaks to me in a three-fold way about that rich and altogether satisfying spiritual provision which God has made for us in the Lord Jesus Christ.

1. Manna was the gift of God to people who had treated Him very badly. God had looked down and seen His people in terrible bondage in the land of Egypt; and with many signs, wonders and judgments He had delivered them from their slavery. From the day they left Egypt, His care of them had been unceasing. He led them miraculously and safely through the Red Sea. He gave them rest and refreshment at an oasis named Elim, with its twelve wells of water and seventy palm trees. But despite all this, at the first experience of hardship, those thankless people rebelled against God, and wished they were back in Egypt with its bread and its flesh pots.

What was God to do with such impossible people? What response was He to make to such base ingratitude and faithlessness? He rained bread from heaven!

Oh, the amazing magnanimity of our God! When Adam and Eve failed so terribly in the Garden of Eden, God might have tuned them adrift into an unproductive wilderness. But instead, He clothed them with coats of skin and gave them a good earth whose fertile soil would respond to their manual labor.

And 2,000 years ago, the world had reached a state of moral corruption which was indescribable. It was a world ripe for judgment. When the human mind might have said that nothing was too bad for the world, God believed that nothing was too good for it; and at that precise moment, He sent His Only Son to redeem and save His people. Well might John Henry Newman exclaim:

Oh loving wisdom of our God!
When all was sin and shame,
A second Adam to the fight
And to the rescue came.

And what was our Lord's most famous parable? Surely the story of a father whose younger son went off to a far country and squandered his possessions in riotous living. And when that son came staggering back, a physical and moral wreck, his father rushed to meet him, flung his arms around him, and welcomed him as though he were a prince. Such, said Jesus, is God, our heavenly Father.

"This is the bread which the Lord has given you to eat." Still God deals with us in that same strangely wonderful way. So often, even as believers in Christ, we betray Him and crucify Him afresh, by our self-centeredness, our lack of concern for the un-evangelized millions around

the world, by our petty jealousies, our hurtful tempers, our telltale dishonesties, our impurities of thought, speech and behavior.

But still He loves us and provides us with the bread of heaven. Why? Because God's love is a love which, by its very nature, must always be giving. John Oxenham is speaking of human love as a faint shadow of the divine love when he writes:

Love ever gives, forgives, outlives,
And ever stands with open hands.
And while it lives, it gives;
For this is love's prerogative,
To give, and give, and give.

An old man had a son who, over the years, had brought great grief to him. One day a neighbor inquired about the young fellow. "Oh, he's doing very badly," confessed the father; "he drinks constantly and is behaving in a shocking manner." "If he were my son," exclaimed the neighbor, "I would turn him out." "Yes," replied the father, "and so would I if he were your son. But, you see, he's not your son, he's mine!"

So often we, too, have broken God's heart with our secret sins, our sordid hypocrisies, and our callous unconcern for others. And yet He prepares a Table for us. Isn't it amazing that He Who is equal with the Father, should have gone to Calvary's Cross for you and me? Listen to Him speaking to you as He speaks to me just now:

"This is the bread which the Lord has given you to eat!"

Manna—it was bread for the unworthy; but

2. It was also the bread that came during the hours of darkness. The farmer reaps his fields when the sunlight is falling in glory across the "amber waves of grain." But silently, during the long watches of the night, the saving provision descended from the heavenly Father's storehouse. And in the morning, all that the people had to do was to gather it!

God often delivers His bread to us during darkness;

It was amid the darkness of an Eastern night that our Savior came, a helpless little Child, into this sin-darkened world.

It was while the world was bathed in darkness during that awesome three-hour blackout on the first Good Friday, that the miracle of redemption was enacted on the hill of Calvary.

A poor mother's heart was breaking as she walked toward the cemetery where they were going to lay to rest the body of her only boy. But at that very moment, Jesus came to her, and gave her boy back to her through the miracle of resurrection!

A distracted woman who, for twelve long years had endured physical and mental anguish

because of an incurable disease, was at the point of utter despair. But at that very moment, healing power flowed from the Savior's seamless robe!

I repeat—God often delivers His bread to us during our hours of darkness. Why is the darkness of pain or disappointment or sorrow allowed to enshroud us so often and so relentlessly, even when we try to live close to the Lord in obedience to His revealed will?

Perhaps it is because He loves and trusts us so much that He permits us to share with Him something of the anguish He experiences as He agonizes over a world which, for the most part, has turned its back upon Him. Paul, in Philippians 3:10 says that he yearns to share Christ's sufferings. A ministerial friend of mine had a sister who, one day, received word that she had a terminal malignancy. And as he went to visit her, he wondered what he should say. But when he entered her home, her first words to him were these: "Leslie, isn't it wonderful that God feels He can trust me with cancer?!" You see what she meant? God allowed this to happen to her because He knew she would not fly in His face in hatred and rebellion. And she regarded even the killing cancer as an opportunity to share with her Lord in His anguish over a lost and dying world.

Or perhaps God allows the trauma because He has some priceless lesson to teach us which He knows we can't learn in any other way. Through the very darkness of our bitter pain and heartbreak, He proposes to come to us, bringing bread from heaven to nourish our souls. You remember the world-famous orchestral conductor who was questioned about a young singer who was rapidly making a name for herself. He said, "She has a magnificent voice; and if someone would break her heart, she could become the finest soprano in Europe."

I was ordained one year before the end of World War II. We had almost fifty young men from our congregation serving in the British Armed Forces; and I wondered how, as a young, inexperienced pastor, I could minister to them upon their return home, for many of them had suffered dreadfully, some in Japanese prison camps. But I need not have been apprehensive, for every single one of them came home with renewed faith in God's providence and sovereignty, and with a new appreciation of spiritual values. You would imagine that the horrors to which many of them had been subjected would have driven them to atheism. But no. God came to them through the darkness, until the darkness became a great light!

Sometimes when the darkness deepens around us, and life delivers its knockout blows, we wonder if God cares—if He is strong enough to help us, or if we are simply held in the clutches of inexorable fate.

Never doubt, my friend. God will not pass you by. He is nearest to you when you need Him most! Remember that He allows you to pass through the flames of anguish in order that the pure gold of a Christ-like character may emerge from the fire as "a thing of beauty and a joy forever."

Listen to the writer to the Hebrews: "Being afflicted isn't enjoyable while it is happening—it hurts! But afterwards we can see the result, a quiet growth in grace and character" (Hebrews 12:11).

“This is the bread which the Lord has given you to eat”—and it comes during’ the darkness!

3. Notice, finally, that the manna was new every morning. Yesterday’s supply could not be used today. The King James Version, with all the indelicate splendor and pungency of Elizabethan English, says that if the manna was kept overnight, “it bred worms and stank.” It had to be gathered fresh every morning, and it was always there to gather!

I wish we all could learn that lesson well. A religious faith which seeks to rest entirely on an experience of yesterday soon wears thin. I remember hearing years ago about a man in England who had had a blessed experience of Christ’s saving power. He committed it to writing and called it his “Blessed Experience”; and, when friends would visit, he would read to them his testimony with deep emotion. One day years later a friend came in, and the gentleman asked his wife if she would go upstairs to his desk and bring down the precious document. When she returned, she had devastating news to report. Said she, “I’m afraid the mice have been in that drawer, and they have chewed up your Blessed Experience!” And a good thing too!

We must feed daily upon Christ, the living Bread, if we wish to become like Him in character and conduct. I encourage you most earnestly to use this week as a time of self-examination in preparation for the service of Holy Communion. I wonder how many of you will read Scripture and pray every day this week, and thus measure your life by God’s standard.

As you come to His Table next Lord’s Day, think not so much of what He did for you or meant to you one year, five years, or twenty years ago. Think rather of what He means to you today. A testimony that He saved you thirty years ago or thirty days ago is worthless unless people can see that your life has been changed, and that you are looking to Christ and walking with Him now, enjoying His transforming friendship and conquering your besetting sins through the power of His indwelling Spirit.

The more we are in the company of some people, the more we yearn to become like them. And it is only as we fellowship with our risen Lord every day that we can hope to nourish within us the fruit of the Holy Spirit. It is this daily culture of the soul through the employment of what our forefathers called “the means of grace” (the study of Scripture, prayer, worship and witness), which makes our lives mighty for God.

I have read of a “Valley of Roses” so extensive that the air is heavy for miles around with the fragrance of the flowers. And the person who passes through the valley finds that the perfume hangs upon his very clothing, so that, if he goes into a room full of people at the end of his journey, they look at one another and smile. They know where he has been!

We read in the New Testament that when people encountered the early Apostles, “they took knowledge of them that they had been with Jesus.” Do your friends look at you and say, “He has been with Jesus!”? Perhaps the greatest indictment that can be leveled at us Christians is that we are so similar to people who have never been with Jesus!

Let us vow here this morning, in this service, that from this day forth we will spend at least

ten minutes every day in private devotion, so that we will be in a state of grace which will make us want more than anything else in life to tell others about our Savior. Do remember, we have

“Just one life, ‘twill soon be past,
Only what’s done for Christ will last.”

The children of Israel gave the food that came through the darkness a strange name. They called it “What is it?”—“Manna”! They felt that behind this miracle there was Someone up there! It was a prophetic name. It revealed the deep hunger of the soul—a hunger that was only to be satisfied when Jesus came. That manna in the wilderness served its day and ceased to be. But the Lord Jesus Christ is “the same yesterday, today and forever.”

So we shall come to the Table, unworthy, but knowing we will be fed. We shall come, it may be, in some deep darkness, but knowing that He will find us even in the midst of our pain and frustration. The Lord is waiting to be gracious. May we hear His words: “Take, eat.” “This is the bread which the Lord has given you to eat!”

AMEN.