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Scripture Text: Exodus 16:1-36; Reading: vv1-12

Sermon Title: *Bread from Heaven*

Manuscript written by Roger Roberts and sermon preached

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Sources cited in this manuscript are listed at the end.

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Bread from Heaven

Introduction:

Open your Bibles to our text, as we resume (after our two Sundays of Holy Week) our study of the Book of Exodus, the Old Testament story of God's great deliverance of his people. Three Sundays ago we looked at the Israelites' crossing the Sea (Chapter 14) as a picture of the power of our salvation, now displayed for us in the resurrection of Jesus.

After God miraculously delivered the children of Israel through the sea, destroying the enemy Egyptian army, it didn't take long for them to begin to complain against God and Moses, his servant. Their first time of complaining and murmuring took place at an oasis at Marah, where they complained because the water was too bitter to drink (15:22-27). The Lord responded by making the water good to drink, but that wasn't the end of their complaining. When they came to the wilderness of Sin (no connection with our English word "sin." See Oswalt, *NLT*, 152), they complained

about being hungry. In response to their complaint, God graciously gave them food to eat—bread from heaven. Follow as I read portions of **Exodus 16:1-36**.

When the Israelites saw this mysterious substance on the ground they said “man-hu,” “What is it?” (15). Thus the name for this “bread” that God gave to the Israelites became manna, which was to be their staple food for their 40 year wilderness wanderings. A lot of efforts have been made by scholars to explain to us exactly what it was, but it was a tasty and evidently nutritious substance that was to sustain the Israelites for 40 years until they entered the Promised Land and could grow crops of their own. Unlike what we think of as bread, manna was apparently like the “sweet secretion of the tamarisk tree,” a honey-like, flakey substance that could be easily gathered and stored (Honeycutt, 382)

Many of us remember as newlyweds eating “manna.” When our brides, novices in the kitchen, brought us a dish for dinner, perhaps our mental response was “What is it?” a question that would have been too risky to verbalize. But if your experience was like mine, you discovered that God more than sustained you during the occasional meals of “manna.”

We do know that the manna God gave to the complaining Israelites was a divine provision, regardless of its similarity to natural substances. In fact, Paul says it was the “spiritual food” which God gave to his people in the wilderness (1 Corinthians 10:3). This physical substance became for us a type of the spiritual substance we have in Christ Jesus, who identified himself as the fulfillment of what was prefigured in the manna in the wilderness (John 6:32f, 35ff, 48ff).

Let’s look together at this bread from heaven as we note that it is first of all...

Given by a gracious God

In this experience of the Israelites we see the grace of God shining through to counter the image some have of the God of the Old Testament being only a God of wrath and judgment (a point made by Enns, 324). God’s response to the grumbling of his people was to give them “meat to eat in the evening and all the bread (they would want) in the morning” (8).

To a grumbling people in need of testing

“Whining was Israel’s besetting sin,” writes one writing pastor (Ryken, 423). So soon after God’s miraculous deliverance through the Sea the, Israelites began to grumble and complain, which expressed their deeply rooted nature of unbelief. This pictures what a slow and ongoing process is conversion and how immaturity is a perennial challenge for all of us.

These disgruntled Israelites began to idealize the past in Egypt, remembering only the few advantages and minimizing the hardships, such as oppressive slavery (3, Durham, 219). Ancient writer on asceticism, John Cassian (d. c.433), noted that “bodily renunciation and removal from Egypt...will be of no value to us...if we have been unable to obtain at the same time the renunciation of heart which is more sublime and beneficial” (85). It was easier to get Israel out of Egypt than to get Egypt out of the Israelites (Ryken, 424).

They remind me of some church members I had difficulty with in a former pastorate in the US, who were quick to register their complaints against our church, usually for not providing the services and customer satisfaction they expected. They usually extolled the virtues of their former church, how good things were and, of course, how much they were blessed and a blessing to many. But I suspected that, like with these disgruntled Israelites, life in the former church wasn't as great as they remembered and wanted us to think.

And you who are newly converted, when difficulties arise because of your newfound faith and commitment to follow Christ, you may be tempted to think life was better before you came to faith in him. At least, you think to yourself, you got along with your old friends and family members. But you need to remember that also you were without hope and without God in the world (Ephesians 2:12), and that you have been delivered from spiritual lost-ness and death and have eternal resurrection life and hope.

The immaturity and complaining spirit of the Israelites was evidence of their need for testing. God was to perform the miracle of providing food for his rebellious children, and the way they would trust him to provide would be part of his testing them (4). The years in the wilderness were to be “a school of life” for the Israelites (Wiersbe, 91ff). And when we're in God's school of life, we never know when he will give us a test. But unlike with some of your teachers or professors, you never have to fear or dread his tests. In fact, James says we are “consider it pure joy” when we are tested because God is at work to develop our character into Christ-like maturity and completeness of character (1:2ff).

God's testing us, as with the Israelites, is not to trip us up or to discourage us, but quite the opposite. His testing is like the training of an athlete by a coach, who is giving exercise, practice and workouts in order to prepare the athlete to win in competition. As one has said, God's purpose is to make a “tougher people,” who would be prepared to enter the Promised Land (Motyer, 180). God is at work, testing us through his divine and perfect providence and care, so that we might “be conformed to the likeness of his Son” (Romans 8:28f). When we are facing and undergoing difficult circumstances, we shouldn't ask, “*How* can I get out of this?” Rather we should ask, “*What* can I get out of this?” (Wiersbe, 95).

In this wilderness school of life, the Lord was showing his people that his heavenly bread was to be...

His provision of every need, eternal and temporal

Whatever the substance of this man-hu, manna, it was God's miraculous provision, as was the evening meal of quail. Large migrations of quail from Europe to Africa would customarily fall to the ground in this part of the Middle East, and were easily caught (Motyer, 184). Although God provided out of his resources of nature, yet the witness of Scripture and common sense is that God miraculously provided in order to feed such a great number of pilgrim wanderers for 40 years, day and night (Durham, 224, citing Psalm 78:23ff).

This manna was God's physical provision for their immediate needs, but also represented the presence of Christ with them, who is our spiritual food (1 Corinthians 10:3). When Jesus gave the sign miracle of feeding the 5,000, he was revealing himself as the true manna, the bread from heaven who fed the Israelites their spiritual food. He is also the Bread from Heaven for us, giving us eternal life, the forgiveness of sin and an everlasting, life-changing, soul-satisfying relationship with God. Just as this manna, this "bread" from heaven, was their source of survival and satisfaction, so is Christ our life (Colossians 3:4). And as Jesus told the fickle crowd after he had fed them physical food, they needed more desperately to feed upon him and receive his life and grace (John 6:53ff).

The Lord gave strict instructions for the Israelites to gather their daily portion (about 2 liters/quarts), which proved to be enough for everyone. Those who greedily tried to hoard extra manna discovered that the extra rotted overnight! Moses was "furious" (Durham, 222) with the greedy and disobedient Israelites (20). They would gather a double amount on the sixth day so they wouldn't have to gather on the Sabbath, and miraculously that manna remained fresh for consumption on the Sabbath (24).

Although the Sabbath law was to be formalized at Mt Sinai along with the other laws in the Decalogue (20:8), the concept of the 7th day as a day of rest was already in force. This Sabbath was a reminder that God is our provider and we are mortal creatures that must follow his pattern and example of rest (Genesis 2:2). God provides for and even commands our rest as a demonstration that his sustenance and care are his gracious gifts ("The Sabbath was made for man," said Jesus. Mark 2:27). Our greatest rest, however, is not physical, but is the rest we find in Jesus, in his forgiveness of our sins, and in our relationship of trust in and obedience to him (Matthew 11:28ff; Hebrews 4:9ff). We look forward to the everlasting rest of Christ in the New Heavens and Earth, but even now we enjoy the rest of our relationship with Christ and also rest in the assurance of his love and care.

Jesus taught us to pray to the heavenly Father for our daily bread, which means obviously our dependence on him for our physical needs as well as for eternal life in

Christ (Matthew 6:11). As Paul reasons, we who are God's children by faith in Christ, have already received the greatest "bread," the gift of his Son who has given us eternal life. How much more reason do we have to believe that God will also "graciously give us all things" (Romans 8:32)!

We are often like these Israelites who failed the test of trusting God to provide for their daily needs, and thus they hoarded "unauthorized" manna, more than their allocated share. Like these Israelites, we claim to be God's redeemed people, delivered through the Sea, through the cross and resurrection of Jesus. Yet, though professing faith, we often act like "practical atheists," living and fretting and worrying and complaining as though God doesn't exist. We are like the Israelites the psalmist said who "vexed the Holy One of Israel" and "did not remember his power" which he had revealed in Egypt and through the parting of the waters (Psalm 78:41ff).

The message of the bread from heaven is one of keeping our focus on the love, goodness, power and faithfulness of God, to "remember his power." This bread from heaven is given by a gracious God but also is...

Gathered by an obedient people

God was teaching, coaching and disciplining his people to live with...

Daily dependence

The Lord commanded the people to gather this bread from heaven "each day" (4). "The petition in the Lord's Prayer, 'Give us this day...', probably derives from this verse" (Rylaarsdam, 950). Moses was furious with the Israelites who tried to store up more than they needed, in direct disobedience to the Lord's instructions (20). One of the great challenges in the life of following Jesus is to learn to depend on the Father for our daily needs, especially in this materialistic age, when we find it difficult to separate our wants from our real needs.

Although their lifestyle was much simpler than ours, these who hoarded extra manna were the precursors of materialism with their striving for "upward mobility," trying to gain an edge over their fellow Israelites (Enns, 342). Scriptures are full of warnings about the subtle danger of moving beyond caring for life's essentials for ourselves and our families into greed, materialism, serving the god of mammon (Matthew 6:24) and falling in love with money, the root of all kinds of evil (1 Timothy 6:10).

I certainly need to grow in grace that will enable me to trust God for his faithful, daily provision. Even though we have enough food in our cupboards and refrigerator for today and probably for a few weeks ahead, I need to live in a spirit of daily dependence on his sustaining grace, his moment-by-moment protection from life's dangers and the fiery darts of the Evil One (Ephesians 6:10-20), and from my own self-destructive sinful nature (James 1:13ff). I depend on Christ as the very air that I

breathe and need his daily forgiveness of sins that keeps me in fellowship with him (1 John 1:9).

Most of us could probably share a testimony about how God has provided for you in a particular, extraordinary or even miraculous way. Billy Graham related the following story of Captain Eddie Rickenbacker, a US pilot who was shot down over the Pacific Ocean during World War II:

“For weeks nothing was heard of him,” relates Graham. “The newspapers reported his disappearance and across the country thousands of people prayed. Mayor LaGuardia asked the whole city of New York to pray for him. Then he returned. The Sunday papers headlined the news, and in an article, Captain Rickenbacker himself told what happened. ‘And this part I would hesitate to tell,’ he wrote, ‘except that there were six witnesses who saw it with me. A gull came out of nowhere, and lighted on my head—I reached up my hand very gently—I killed him and then we divided him equally among us. We ate every bit, even the little bones. Nothing ever tasted so good.’ This gull saved the lives of Rickenbacker and his companions. Years later,” reports the evangelist, “I asked him to tell me the story personally, because it was through this experience that he came to know Christ. He said, ‘I have no explanation except that God sent one of his angels to rescue us.’” And Graham states that during his ministry he has heard or read “literally thousands of similar stories” (4). Rickenbacker came to know the Bread from Heaven through the way he supplied his desperate immediate, physical need. Many of you here today could share stories of God’s miraculous provision, if not as dramatic as Captain Rickenbacker, at least as inspiring and convincing.

However God chooses to provide, even in allowing us the privilege of gainful employment, God is our faithful provider who has promised to supply every need of ours according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:19). Although God is the provider of the Bread of Heaven and of our daily bread, he nevertheless calls us to seek his provision through our...

Daily discipline

As one has said, the quail that God sent were “easily beamed” and bagged, but still they had to be gathered, as did the manna (Ramm, 101). In the same way, our salvation is by grace, but must be received by faith, and as we come to faith in Christ we enter a life of obedient discipleship, taking the way of the cross. The Israelites needed to be trained in faith and obedience, as do we. And for us to grow in grace requires that we “make every effort” to add godly virtues to our lives (2 Peter 1:5).

Jesus made it very clear that the manna of the Israelites was prophetic of him as the eternal Bread from Heaven (John 6:25-59). He is the source of our life and we are to receive him and live in a love relationship with the Father through him. Though we haven’t seen him, Peter says, we love him and believe in him and are filled with “an inexpressible and glorious joy” (1 Peter 1:8). When Jesus clearly identified himself

as the Bread of Life and said that his followers must feed upon and drink of him in order to have eternal life, the crowd thinned out. Obviously, they were willing to follow him as the provider of material food and as an earthly kingdom “savior,” but were unwilling to seek and live upon Jesus himself. They wanted what he could provide, not Jesus himself, just as many today want what Jesus can do for them and aren’t so interested in seeking Jesus himself (John 6:60-66). The writer of Hebrews warned immature believers of the danger of departing from Christ after having simply “tasted the heavenly gift,” the Bread from heaven, as it were (6:4), becoming like the Israelites who died in the wilderness and failed to enter the Promised Land (1 Corinthians 10:3-5).

Once we decide with Simon Peter that Jesus alone has the words of eternal life (John 6:68), then we must also engage in the daily discipline of appropriating Jesus and receiving his resurrection life in the here and now. We are given the life of Jesus through the Holy Spirit, who is Christ in us (Colossians 1:27). We are to seek to walk in step with the Spirit day by day and to allow the Holy Spirit to fill and totally influence us in gradual Christ-character formation (Galatians 5:16-25; Ephesians 5:18). This we experience as we engage in corporate worship with the Body of Christ, and in personal, daily worship through Scripture reading and listening prayer.

This lifestyle of weekly corporate and daily personal worship is like the Israelites gathering their portion of manna each day and enjoying the Sabbath manna, which is for us the Lord’s day of rest and worship, so essential to a God-blessed, Christ-honoring life. As one pastor has wisely noted, just as the Israelites couldn’t hoard manna for the next day, so we can’t live on occasional ‘mountaintop” worship experiences or past blessings, but must daily come before the Lord in worship and prayer, seeking daily cleansing of sin and a fresh word from the Scripture that will correct, direct and encourage us.

This pastor says that, just as manna was gathered in the morning, that’s usually the best time for our personal worship and listening prayer time. He cites an array of biblical examples, headed by Jesus himself, who were early risers, saying that it’s best to begin our workdays with a good meal of manna (Wiersbe, 98). Jesus himself, at his desert temptation experience, quoted Scripture to the devil, who sought to tempt him to turn stones into bread: “It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God’” (Matthew 4:4, quoting Deuteronomy 8:3).

Our daily discipline is not to lead us to a self-directed, self-centered type of Christian piety that ignores the needs of others. The more I reflect on the promises of God’s provision for his people, such as in Matthew 6:25ff and Philippians 4:19, the more I think these promises speak to the responsibility of the Body of Christ, the church and Christian community, to help the needy and share with the poor. And Paul quoted our text (16) when he emphasized our responsibility to share our abundance with those in need, “so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will

be equality, as it is written: ‘He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little’” (2 Corinthians 8:13ff).

When we share our resources with those in need, we find greater blessing for ourselves and also participate in the joy of the harvest of God’s meeting all of our needs as well (Matthew 6:33). What greater joy is there than that of sharing with the spiritually hungry the Bread of Life? Jesus himself was refreshed with heavenly food when he shared eternal life with the Samaritan woman. He told his astonished disciples, who had gone to get him some physical food, “I have food to eat that you know nothing about.’ Then his disciples said to each other, ‘Could someone have brought him food?’ ‘My food,’ said Jesus, ‘is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work’” (John 4:31ff). Jesus was strengthened and refreshed by the same heavenly food of which he was the perfect embodiment (Park, 953).

DT Niles (1908-1970), Sri Lankan evangelist, ecumenical leader and hymn writer, is well known for his definition of evangelism: “One beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.” And the Bread of Life transforms beggars into abounding children of the King.

Conclusion:

In a few moments, following our song of response to the word, we will share the Table of our Lord, the Bread of Life who has given himself to us and has given us this Supper to remember his sacrifice for us.

Moses told Aaron to put an omer (2 liters/quarts) of manna in a jar and place inside the ark of the covenant, as a reminder of God’s provision during their wilderness wanderings (33ff). And so Jesus commissioned us to take bread and break and eat it as a reminder of his body given for us as the Bread from Heaven who gives us eternal and abundant resurrection life (Matthew 25:26, etc. John 6:54ff).

Just as the Passover was “forward looking” (Enns, 327), with prophetic significance with the first and second coming of Jesus, so is this manna, this bread of the New Covenant, which Jesus says he won’t eat again until with us in the Marriage Supper of the Lamb (Matthew 25:29; Revelation 19:6ff).

Christ is here today and offers himself to us as the true Bread from Heaven. As he said, other food spoils and eventually fails to nourish and satisfy, but the Bread of Life “endures to eternal life” (John 6:27). Today you who are outside of Christ can enter a life-changing, everlasting relationship with God through faith in his Son.

Those of us who know him need to ask ourselves if we continue to feed upon and seek after him in the full measure of his resurrection life in us. What we have received is only a “foretaste,” and sample of what we will have in glory (Romans 8:23). But even now we may be living more like beggars, paupers and panhandlers

than children of the King, who is Bread from Heaven. God help us to feed upon the one who is “real food” (John 6:55)! God help us also to be people of faith and obedience, who trust in his daily supply of all we need, and who enables us to be a blessing to those in need of present food on the table and eternal Bread from Heaven!

Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. Look at verses 1-3. What do you think were the reasons behind the Israelites grumbling against Moses? Were they justified? Why or why not?
2. What do you think about the Israelites' memory of how things used to be when they were slaves in Egypt? Were they honest and accurate memories? Have you ever wished for “the good old days” and idealized how things used to be? Share with the group.
3. In what way was the Lord testing the Israelites (4)? What does this testing mean and why was he giving them this test? How has God tested you? What do you think was/is his purpose for your test?
4. What is the “glory” the Lord was showing them (7,10)? What is the glory of the Lord, and have you seen it? Share with the group.
5. Some think the God revealed in the Old Testament is mostly a God of judgment and wrath. In what ways does this chapter reveal the grace of God?
6. Manna was God's daily provision for his people during their 40 years in the wilderness. How did Jesus teach us to depend on and pray for our daily bread? How are we to depend on the Father?
7. Think about Jesus' miracle of feeding the 5,000 in John 6:1-15 and in verses 25-59 about his claim to be the Bread of Life. What does this claim mean to you? How are you to receive this Bread? What does the command about gathering a daily portion of manna (Exodus 16:16-20) say to you about how you are to depend on and receive your “daily bread,” both physical and spiritual?

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