

Bread in the Wilderness

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[0 : 00] Thanks be to God. You know, one of the things about a crisis like this pandemic that we're all living through right now is that it can be profoundly disorienting.

It can be profoundly disorienting because everything is different. You know, everything in life is different. Things that we took for granted now have completely changed.

Things that mattered so much three months ago don't really matter anymore. And there are things that we never even used to think about that now occupy much of our waking time and energy.

You know, I think that we're going to feel the ripple effects of this for years to come. This will be a major defining event for many of us for our entire lives.

And we know that we are not going to go back to the old normal, that we are all moving towards some kind of new normal, but no one's really sure what that means.

[0 : 58] And so I think all of us feel a kind of disorientation. And a big question on many people's minds, including mine, is how do we get reoriented? Are there solid things that we can hold on to to help us feel oriented when so much of life is different?

And that's why we've been looking every week for the past few weeks at the Lord's Prayer. We've been looking at this prayer that Jesus taught His disciples and that He teaches us.

But it's much more than a prayer. It's meant to show us how to live life in a world that God made and to have a relationship with that God.

It shows us how to live in the world that God has made and have a relationship with Him. And in particular this week, we're going to be looking at the petition in this prayer, Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread.

And if you've been following along, you know that the Lord's Prayer is much more than just a prayer to be memorized and recited, that it's actually densely packed and is really a summary of much of the Old and New Testament, packed into a prayer.

[2 : 08] And so this petition is about much more than just ensuring that we have enough food to eat every day. Anyone hearing this petition, Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread, anyone hearing this in Jesus' day would have immediately thought back to a very defining time in the history of Israel.

And that was the time when the people of Israel were wandering in the wilderness. And God provided for them miraculously by giving them daily bread, what they called manna.

And so we're going to look back at this place in Israel's history and we're going to ask what this has to do with us and how we understand this prayer. And so we're going to be looking at Exodus chapter 16.

We're going to look at the whole chapter. And we're going to see three things about life in the wilderness and how to orient ourselves rightly in such a life.

So we're going to see the truth about the wilderness. We're going to see the fear of the wilderness. And then we're going to see the invitation in the wilderness. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word.

[3 : 16] And we recognize that you promise that these are more than just words on a page, that you actually, through your Holy Spirit, can illuminate these words, can open our minds and hearts to receive these words, and that through these written words, we have an opportunity to come face to face with your living word, Jesus Christ.

And it's in his name that we pray. Amen. So first of all, this passage shows us the truth about the wilderness. A little context.

Exodus chapter 16, as I said a moment ago, at this point in the story, God has just miraculously freed his people from a lifetime of slavery in Egypt. And this happened climactically through the victory at the Red Sea, where God parts the water and the people cross on dry land and the Pharaoh's armies are swallowed up.

And this is this amazing climactic moment. There's singing and celebration and praising of the Lord that happens. And in Exodus chapter 16, they're just at the very beginning of what will turn out to be a 40-year journey through the wilderness.

Their entire lives are going to be lived in the wilderness. And it's 40 years of wandering in search of their permanent home. They know that the wilderness is not their home. It's not a habitable land.

[4 : 37] And so their hope rests in one day finding their permanent home. And the wilderness is a harsh place. And the people at this point in the story are starving.

And so they're grumbling and complaining and shaking their fists at Moses and Aaron. And so God miraculously provides them with food.

He gives them quail and He gives them manna, which is described as a kind of flaky substance that appears on the ground in the morning. And so they have to go out every morning and gather it up.

In other words, God miraculously provides them with daily bread. This is the association that people would have had with daily bread. And at the end of chapter 16, verse 35 tells us that the people of Israel actually lived off this daily bread for their entire time in the wilderness, for 40 years, until they finally made it to the promised land of Canaan.

So one of the main associations with the phrase daily bread is that this is what the Israelites ate when they were wandering in the wilderness. Now I want you to think about this for a moment.

[5 : 43] Just think about what's happening here. When Jesus teaches His disciples to pray, when Jesus teaches us to pray, He says that we need to pray and ask God to give us this day our daily bread.

But if daily bread is clearly a reference to manna in the wilderness, then what is Jesus saying? Jesus' point is this.

We are still in the wilderness. The exodus never ended. All the hopes that God's people had that one day their time in the wilderness would be over when they reached the promised land, well, if you read, you know that when they finally arrived in Canaan, and in some ways it fulfilled those promises, but in other ways it didn't.

And what you realize is the story of Israel is actually a kind of microcosm of the story of the world. And that in the same way that they were wandering in the wilderness, Jesus is saying that all of us are wandering in the wilderness.

We are all in search of a permanent eternal home, and this is not it. And that's a big deal to realize that. It's a big deal to begin to see your life through that lens.

[6 : 55] And so the truth of the wilderness is this. The wilderness is not actually a place. It's a spiritual condition. The wilderness is a spiritual condition.

It is the Bible's way of describing life as it is now in this world. And so Jesus is saying that that's why this world is full of uncertainty and full of suffering and death.

That's why in this world we have to deal with things like viruses and economic collapse, not to mention things like injustice or racism or poverty or violence.

Those are the kinds of things that happen in the wilderness. They were not part of God's original creation, nor will they be part of the world when God makes everything new. They are realities, however, that we have to face in the wilderness.

Now, I think some of us have probably lost touch with this to some degree. Wealth and technology insulate us from the harsh realities of the wilderness to a certain extent. But this pandemic, I think, has kind of lifted the veil.

[8 : 01] I think that this pandemic has in many ways reminded us how vulnerable we are, how vulnerable our society is. The reality is we're in the wilderness.

And so no matter how much you own or how successful you are or where you live, spiritually speaking, we have to figure out how to live life in the wilderness. And one of the first things that we have to figure out how to deal with is fear.

There is fear in the wilderness. There's much to be afraid of. Now, the first thing I want to say about the fear in the wilderness is this. Fear is a perfectly valid response to life.

Okay? If you've never felt fear, then you're just not paying attention. It's valid to feel fear. So I'm not saying that it's not. But the kind of fear I'm talking about is more like an existential dread.

And I think that this pandemic has awakened in many people an awareness of that existential dread. We try to spend much of our lives not dwelling on this kind of thing.

[9 : 05] But it's this sort of fear of our own mortality, of the fragility of life. It's this fear that ultimately we're all alone in the world, that no one's looking out for us, that we come into the world alone and we die alone.

It's a fear of scarcity. It's this fear that ultimately we're not going to have enough of the things that we need. And this kind of existential dread is very present in the wilderness.

And this kind of fear has this way of enslaving us. It has this way of defining how we live our lives and driving the decisions that we make.

And as we see in Exodus chapter 16, this kind of fear takes over and creates all kinds of problems for God's people. One of the things fear does when it takes over is it really begins to distort our thinking.

And by the way, for some of this, I have to thank my friend Greg Thompson and some of his insights. But fear has a way of distorting our thinking. If you look at this point in the story, barely a month has passed before God's people are already grumbling and complaining.

[10 : 16] He has miraculously delivered them. He has miraculously set them free. And barely a month has passed. And yet by verse 3, the people are saying this.

What you've got to understand is they're actually suggesting, some of them have actually come to believe that life was better back in Egypt.

And they're saying, you know, I would rather we died as slaves in Egypt because at least we had food to eat. And you realize how distorted their thinking has become. They have this kind of rose-colored picture of the past that is not in all line up with the reality that they actually experienced.

You know, now some people tend to do that. They tend to idealize the past. Other people tend to idealize the future. And this reminds me of a quote one time I heard Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sachs speak.

And he said this about our politics. He said, people on the right dream of a golden past that never was. And people on the left yearn for a utopian future that never will be.

[11 : 24] See, in both cases, you have fantasies that I believe are ultimately driven by fear. And it makes you wonder, how much of our politics is driven by fear underneath?

So the first thing fear does is it distorts our perspective. Another thing fear does is fear leads to accusation. If you're driven by fear, it makes you more and more and more accusatory toward other people in your life.

Notice that the people are blaming Moses and Aaron in verse 3. They say, for you've brought us out into the wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger. They're saying, I'm hungry.

I'm fearful. I'm suffering. And it's your fault. You're the one to blame. And that's the thing about fear. Fear always looks for someone to blame.

This is your fault. If you had only done this, or if you had only not done that, then I wouldn't have to face this suffering and this fear. And it's amazing to see how this plays out with the pandemic.

[12 : 25] Everybody wants someone to blame for why things got so bad. Whose fault is it? Is it China's fault? Is it President Trump's fault? Is it the World Health Organization's fault? So many articles are being written right now with people trying to make the case why their person is the person that needs to be blamed.

How many fights have happened? How many fights have happened between friends, between roommates, between families?

How many fights have happened in marriages because someone was afraid that their needs were not going to get met? And so they lash out with accusation.

This happens all the time. Because this is what fear does. Fear drives us and leads us to accuse. A third thing fear does is it often manifests itself as control.

Fear manifests itself as control. Fear happens. In verses 19 and 20, Moses says, Only gather what you need for the day. He's talking about the manna. Only gather what you need for the day and eat it and don't keep any leftovers.

[13 : 31] But of course the people disobey and they try to hoard it so that they can have enough for the following day. But when they wake up in the morning, it's all rotted and worm infested. But what we see here is the instructions tell the people to only gather what they need for the day.

But the fact is, if you don't store any and you eat everything that you've gathered, it means that you're not in control of tomorrow. It means you're completely at the mercy of God.

And you're not in control. And so what fear says is, fear says you must be in control. You can't trust anyone else. You can't trust things to happen if you're not controlling them.

So fear says you must be in control of as much as you can. Take matters into your own hands. So if you struggle with being a controlling person, underneath that, there's probably a lot of fear.

Because fear says that the only way to be safe is to do all that you can to control your future. To do all that you can to control, to ensure that certain outcomes come to pass.

[14 : 37] Or maybe to do all that you can to prevent bad things from happening. You have to think through every scenario, every possibility. That's the only way you're going to be safe. Maybe fear drives you to try to control another person in your life.

Or maybe fear drives you to try to control what other people think of you. But fear says the only way you're going to be safe is if you're in control. And so, so much of our anxiety is the result of us trying to control things that we can't actually control.

And we drive ourselves crazy. So this is one of the things that fear does. It tells us that we have to be in control. And then the last thing fear does is fear robs us of rest.

It robs us of rest. God says on the sixth day, gather enough for the seventh day. Because that's the Sabbath. And he says on the Sabbath, I'm not going to provide any manna. Nor should you go out and try to gather any manna.

That's a day of rest and worship. And a lot of this passage is actually about observing the Sabbath. So of course, what do the people do? Well, they go out on the Sabbath to try to gather manna.

[15 : 42] And of course, just like God said, there's none to be gathered. But this is fear talking again. Fear says there's no time to rest. Fear says you can't ever stop.

Because all of this ultimately depends on you. And no one out there has your back. So fear says you can't ever rest. And that kind of thinking wears you down over time.

That kind of hypervigilance that we live with day in and day out wears you down over time. It exhausts you. It depletes your resources. So some of us are exhausted by this pandemic.

Not necessarily because we're doing a lot. But because fear has this kind of churn going in our minds and our hearts where we can't ever allow ourselves to rest. We're reading and we're absorbing information.

We're thinking about catastrophic scenarios. And we just never stop. So this is the kind of thing that shows us that we maybe have been enslaved by fear.

[16 : 37] When fear starts to drive everything in our lives. And as I said before, there is reason to be afraid in the wilderness. There are legitimately things to be afraid of. But there's also an invitation in the wilderness.

There's something that can actually only be found in the wilderness. And it's the kind of thing that when you find it, it will begin to set you free from fear. There's a purpose behind the daily bread.

There's a reason why God does this the way He does it. And you see that purpose in verses 4 and 6 and 12. Where God says first that He wants to see whether or not His people will trust Him enough to follow and obey His Word.

He says, I want to test them to see if they'll actually follow my instructions. Which is an act of trust. And then God says He wants to teach His people something about Himself. Then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.

And that word is actually Yahweh. That I am Yahweh your God. I'm not just some vague deity. I'm not just some abstract idea of a divine higher power. I'm Yahweh.

[17 : 45] I'm your God. And you're going to see that when I provide for you in the wilderness. So what's all this about? All these people have ever known is slavery.

If you know their history, they were born into slavery. Their parents were born into slavery. Their parents were born into slavery. Their entire culture is defined by enslavement.

It's all they know. And as a slave, they had to depend on their slave masters for their daily bread. Right?

And they had to earn it by sweat and blood. And if they didn't work hard, and if they didn't earn their bread, they would starve and die. And so this is the only reality they've ever known.

And now that God has actually set them free from slavery and brought them into the wilderness, they have no idea how to live as free people. They have no idea how to be free.

[18 : 41] They're slaves in their minds. And they're slaves in their hearts. They're slaves to fear. They're slaves to the scarcity mentality that has defined their existence. I can't remember who first said it, but someone said, you know, it took a day to get Israel out of Egypt.

But it's going to take a lifetime to get Egypt out of Israel. Right? They've been formed by their life in Egypt as slaves. So the point of the daily bread is this, right?

Some people say, well, why doesn't God just give all of the bread up front and make it non-perishable? And then they can just store it up and have as much as they want. Well, there's a point to this daily exercise.

The point of the daily bread is this. God has brought former slaves into the wilderness to teach them how to live as free women and men who belong only to the God who made them and no one else.

God is teaching them how to be free people who belong only to the God who made them and no one else. And so here's how God goes about doing this.

[19 : 47] God says, I'm going to show you how to be free. Here's how I'm going to do it. The first thing that's going to happen when you wake up every day, the first thing that you're going to do is you're going to wake up, you're going to go outside, and you're going to receive a gift from me.

Every single day is going to begin that way. You're going to wake up, you're going to go outside, and you're going to receive a gift. It's not something that you earned.

It's not even necessarily something that you deserve. If you read, you know that all they do is complain and they grumble. And it says God hears the grumbling, and He responds not with indignation or judgment.

He responds with compassion. God says you're going to wake up, you're going to go outside, you're going to receive this gift. And it's not a gift that you've earned. It's a pure gift of grace. It's a gift that I'm giving you simply because I love you.

And every day is going to be defined by that gift. So every day you're going to experience receiving this gift, and this gift is going to remind you that I am your God, and that I love you, and I am for you, and I am with you, and I will continue providing for you and taking care of you for the rest of your life.

[21 : 02] That's the meaning of the daily bread. And that's the kind of gift that if you have it, if you have this gift, you will never have any reason to be afraid.

You'll never have any reason to fear no matter what happens. Because this gift will define your orientation to the world. It will remind you that no matter how bad things get, there is a God who is for you, who loves you, who is with you, and who is taking care of you.

That's the meaning of the bread. And the good news is, as good as this gift was, there's an even better gift that is available to us.

In John chapter 6, Jesus says, Your fathers ate manna in the wilderness. But it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you, listen to this, the true bread from heaven.

For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. In other words, Jesus is saying, The same God who gave daily bread so long ago to our forefathers has done it again.

[22 : 07] He's giving bread to the world once more. Only the bread that he's giving now is the true bread. And he says, The true bread is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.

And of course, the people respond and they say, Where is this bread? Give us this bread always. We want this bread. And then Jesus responds, I am the bread of life. I am the bread of life.

Whoever comes to me shall not hunger. Whoever believes in me shall never thirst. Jesus Christ is the true manna.

He's the true daily bread. He's the one who came to give his life to overcome death, to secure our salvation, and to ensure that we would have life always.

He's the bread who gives life. So the invitation is this. If we want to live in the wilderness, but we want to live in the wilderness not as people who are slaves to fear, but if we want to live as free women and men who know that we belong to God and no one else, God invites us to do what His people did so long ago.

[23 : 16] Begin every day by receiving the true bread, Jesus Christ, in prayer. One of the ways that we can use the Lord's Prayer is to pray this petition and to realize, even as I ask God for my daily bread, I know that God has already answered that prayer by giving me the only bread I really need, Jesus Christ.

And when we receive Jesus anew every day, we are receiving once more that ultimate gift that reminds you that God is your God, that He loves you, that He is for you, that He is with you, and that He will always take care of you.

No matter what your life looks like, no matter what it may seem, no matter what those voices of fear are whispering in your head, it reminds you that those things are true. And over time, that certainty, those daily reminders will begin to melt away the fear in your heart.

So your fear of scarcity will begin to give away to the recognition of the abundance of God's blessing in your life. And when you're focused not on scarcity, what you don't have, but when you're focused on the abundance of provision in your life, all of the ways that God has blessed you, all of the reasons that we have for gratitude, if that's your focus, then that is the seedbed of generosity.

And you will become more and more and more generous. You'll experience the joy and the freedom of giving things away. The more that this takes root in your heart, the more your distorted thinking will become clearer and clearer.

[24 : 50] You'll see things not through rose-colored glasses or through the dark pessimistic lens that some of us have, but you'll see things as they really are. You'll be able to confront reality head-on without the need for any distorted thinking.

The more this sets in, the more you receive the daily bread of Jesus Christ, you'll find that you become less accusatory and that you actually start to become more gracious and more patient and more forgiving toward the people in your life.

The more the daily bread of Jesus takes root in your heart, you'll be able to accept the things that you can't control. You'll find that you'll be able to surrender parts of your life that you used to have a white-knuckled grip on because you know that you're not alone in the world and you trust that your life is in good hands.

And then lastly, when we receive the true bread of Jesus Christ, that is the way to finally find rest for our souls. It's the way to finally know that it doesn't all depend and hinge on us, that there is rest to be found, and it's found in Jesus Christ.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word, and we thank you for the true bread from heaven, Jesus Christ. Lord, we thank you for your love, and I pray for those who know Jesus, who have received this gift, Lord, that he would remind them even now that you are the God who loves them and who is for them and who is with them.

[26 : 23] Lord, I pray that for those who don't know Jesus, I pray that you would awaken in them that hunger that we all have, that every human being has, and that you would show them how that hunger can only be met by receiving Jesus.

And I pray that you would open your hearts to that truth. And Lord, we pray in all this that we would become the kind of people who are able to thrive in the wilderness, who are generous and kind and loving towards those around us, Lord, and that we would not be defined by fear, but by faith and hope and love.

We pray this...