

Daily Bread

Third in Lenten Series on the Lord's Prayer

By

The Reverend Dr. Agnes W. Norfleet
from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

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John 6:30-37

³⁰So they said to Jesus, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing?" ³¹Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" ³²Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." ³⁴They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." ³⁵Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. ³⁶But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. ³⁷Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away.

Exodus 16:2-6, 13-16

²The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. ³The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” ⁴Then the LORD said to Moses, “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. ⁵On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days.” ⁶So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, “In the evening you shall know that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt,

¹³In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. ¹⁴When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. ¹⁵When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, “What is it?” For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, “It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat. ¹⁶This is what the LORD has commanded: ‘Gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer to a person according to the number of persons, all providing for those in their own tents.’”

Jesus gave the prayer he wanted his followers to use in prayer in specific, concrete terms. He did not offer a vague outline of ideas, or propose some general concerns to pray for. He said, in effect, “When you pray, use these words, speak them in these phrases, and say them in order.” His first listeners would have recognized the architecture of this prayer. Its construction is in keeping with a long liturgical tradition. Biblical prayer typically begins with an address to God by name. Then sets of petitions follow, each with its own theme.

This third week in our series on the Lord’s Prayer, we are at a turning point, so it makes sense for us to pause and simply consider the literary structure of this prayer. As it begins, the words direct our hearts and minds in line with the great purposes of God. Today we turn our attention from God’s affairs – God’s name, God’s kingdom, God’s will – to God’s concern for our affairs – our bread, our sins, our temptations. The prayer leads us from thou to us; from *Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven* to the more mundane earthly matters, in time, in place, concerning basic human need: *Give us this day our daily bread*. The first petitions, are sometimes called the “Thou petitions,” three in number. The second set, also three in number, the “We petitions,” focus on the human dimension.¹ *Daily bread for us today*.

Now, anyone sitting on that mountainside where Jesus embedded this lesson on prayer in the very middle of his Sermon on the Mount would recognize the formative reference to daily bread. They would automatically be transported back to the Exodus, during a harsh and uncertain time when the people of ancient Israel were refugees on a journey from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. That journey was long and hard; they were tired, thirsty and hungry, and they began to complain. Only 45 days into the trip with thirty-nine years to go, their complaining was already at a fevered pitch. “Why have you done this to

¹ Albert C. Winn, *A Christian Primer*, p. 55.

us?” they cried to Moses, “We would have been better off - back in the shackles of Egypt; here we are going to die in this God-forsaken place.”

Under the extraordinary circumstances of their rescue from Egypt, we can imagine God was probably frustrated with their complaint. As more than one parent has said to a child, in effect: “There is no way to modulate the human voice to make a whine acceptable.” Think about it - God had just pulled out all the stops. God responded to their suffering cries in Egypt; God raised up Moses to be their leader. When Moses got nervous about public speaking, God called on Aaron to help him. God sent ten plagues to wear down the Egyptians: the Nile River turned to blood, the land was taken over in turn by frogs, disease, hail and locusts. God made the water of the sea to stand up like a wall, led them through the river as on dry land, God drowned the Egyptians, killing their oppressors. Their freedom had cost God a lot, and now, little more than a month after the greatest display of divine power ever, they can do nothing but complain.

They faced - what we face – when life comes at us hard, we wonder about the purposes of God and question the pathway forward. They were about to give up on the God who had done these amazing things; but God never gives up on them. Unlike what a human parent might have done, God responds to their complaint with neither anger nor a punishing time out; but with mercy and grace saying, “I am going to rain down bread from heaven, and I am going to do it day after day, so that the people will know that I am the Lord their God.” Even when the bread rained down, you know what? They were still lacking in the trust department. Do you know what the word manna means in Hebrew? Its literal meaning is: “What is it?” They responded like grumpy adolescents when a full plate of food is put in front of them... “What is it?”

Gracious and filling... it was daily bread. Enough for each day. It could not hoarded or stored. A gift every morning, for the long journey ahead. “Give us this day our daily bread,” Jesus taught us to pray. It may

seem like a small thing given our affluence; but there is nothing small about the generous, merciful, abundant daily gifts of God. As a matter of fact, so formative was the miracle of manna that dropped in the wilderness that *daily bread* became a metaphor for the essential provisions God gives to sustain human life. In Exodus the gift of manna became a symbol for all those pyrotechnic displays of power that preceded it; and in the New Testament it comes to symbolize Jesus himself.

Biblical scholar Tom Wright observes, “The prayer to the Father for daily bread was part of God’s wider and deeper agenda... Jesus eating and drinking with his motley collection of friends was a deliberate sign of the Kingdom. At the heart of his dinner parties stood a central biblical symbol of the Kingdom: the great festive banquet which God has prepared for all people. This banquet looks back to the vision of *a land flowing with milk and honey*; to the prophecy of Isaiah, that *on this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food*; to the Psalmist saying, *thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies.*”²

You see, the us in *Give us this day our daily bread*, is just like the corporate opening address of *our Father, who art in heaven*. When we pray for daily bread, we are attributing the provision every gift that sustains our lives to a good and gracious God. We are also praying, of course, for God to meet the essential needs of the widow and orphan in Ukraine, the starving family in Somalia, the refugee in Syria and at the boarder of Mexico, the urban poor, and rural poor in the United States, and those who live with food insecurity in Lower Merion Township. Give us this day our daily bread is a corporate prayer for the whole human family, for whom God seeks rescue, redemption, reconciliation, and abundant life.

² N.T. Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer*, p. 24-25.

James Miller writes, “Asking for daily bread is an affirmation that the small things in life are important, not just to humans but to God. Even more, it creates an opening of this daily hallowing of life which Jesus modeled, finding the sacred in the commonplace, touching the eternal in shared times of momentary experiences at table.” *Our* daily bread means the regular sustenance that every human being has a right to. Understood this way, the Lord’s Prayer has a forceful, even revolutionary, thrust to it. As D.T. Niles, Sri Lankan leader in the United Methodist Church once put it, “Bread for myself is an economic problem, but bread for my brothers and sisters is a theological problem.”³

Because bread is so utterly material, simple, and necessary for survival, it naturally becomes a powerful symbol for a whole range of blessings, both material and spiritual, for which we must depend on God. By Jesus’ direction and example, food for the body is accompanied by food for the soul. These are the reasons Jesus could utilize the symbolic power of bread to say, *I am the Bread of Life*. It’s as if Jesus said: Yesterday, I fed you. From a couple of fish and a few loaves of bread, we ate together with five thousand people. But now, I am talking about the bread that gives life to body and spirit. Bread that makes you whole. Bread that satisfies you in joy. Bread that nurtures you to do my work. In praying for daily bread we are praying for the daily presence of God in Christ among us.

I read a story recently about the feeding of orphaned children in Europe during World War Two. The devastation of the war, the air raids and bombings, as you know, left countless children alone. They were on a journey they did not choose, severed from families, and relying on crumbs. Whole communities across Europe took these orphaned children in – offering them a safe haven, at least for a time. Even though these children were assigned to homes, had warm beds and full meals, anxieties about their traumatic past invaded their sleep. Fear of being uprooted, fear of again having no food, fear of yet another loss –

³ James E. Miller, *Our Abba: Praying the Lord’s Prayer so it Comes Alive in Us*, p.15-17.

pervaded their young minds. Unable to sleep they became even more anxious. A British psychologist working among these children figured out that the root of their insecurity related to food. Somewhere... and somehow... word among the adoptive families got around to give the children a piece of bread to hold onto while they slept at night. It wasn't much, but it was enough to get them through the long dark nights, because.... The children slept with the promise there would be bread in the morning.⁴

Give us this day our daily bread, Jesus taught us to pray -- so that we would never forget the story of the manna from heaven in whatever wilderness we might be experiencing. Come what may, God provides – bread for the journey each and every day. Jesus is in our midst, the Bread of Life, feeding us, nurturing us, teaching us to live into God's answers to our prayers. Friends, this is a good day, to reach for one of those hunger envelopes in the pew in front of you and put in a Twenty – or more - as a sign that Christ lives among us, the Bread of Life. We have been blessed with more than enough, and our bread is meant to be shared. An answer to prayer. An answer to prayer.

AMEN.

⁴ Will Willimon & Stanley Hauerwas, *Lord, Teach Us*, p. 73.