

# 1 **LIVING ON MANNA**

## **The Call to Daily Dependence**

*This, then, is how you should pray. . . . “Give us today our daily bread” (Matt. 6:9, 11).*

## Learning Daily Dependence

Living on manna is a wonderful, yet frightening, journey on which we learn to trust God for our daily provision. It isn't a journey we complete. It is a daily journey of praying again and again, "Give us today our daily bread."

My wife and I had been in ministry just long enough to learn a few things and not long enough to learn what we needed to know—that we didn't know anything. We had served under the leadership of two very gifted pastors who were gracious enough to shield us from the criticism young pastors often face.

With the experience came arrogance. I was convinced I was ready to lead. I was ready to take on a challenge and impress people with my being "such a young and wise leader." But God had something else in mind. He was about to take me into the desert to teach me what it means to live on manna.

We packed up the truck and headed west. My ten-month-old son sat in his car seat between me and my wife as we towed our car behind the U-haul. South Dakota, look out! Your savior is coming. Little did I know the lesson God had in store for me.

The church was young, less than three years old, and had been planted by one of the most gracious, loving pastors I have met. He knew people and loved them more deeply than I ever could. But I was too naive to know it and too big for my own britches to admit it if I had.

I had \$6,000 in the bank but hadn't learned to surrender any of it to God. After six years of ministry I had only recently begun to give a true tithe. I had "tipped" God for years. I treated Him like an IRS tax return. I looked for every reason to avoid giving so much. The testimony of a board member about moving from tithing on his net income to tithing on his gross income was a turning point, and I began to trust God with my money.

However, I was far from learning the true daily trust of living on manna.

The first months were horrible. Rather than the 85 we had been told were attending that fledgling church, we began with 15 our first Sunday and the situation didn't get any better. The church had been receiving \$5,000 a month support from our denominational leadership. Those funds dwindled to \$500 within a year. Our child care costs skyrocketed to over \$1,000 a month. Our \$6,000 in the bank quickly turned to thousands of dollars of debt.

I was learning a very hard lesson—I needed God. I didn't just need Him a little. I needed Him more desperately than I could ever have believed. I needed Him when I woke up, and I needed Him when I lay down. I needed Him when I was asleep. Like Jacob, I had started the journey convinced I was blessed, but now I was sleeping with my head on a rock and I needed God to intervene in a miraculous way.

I will never forget the night I finally broke. I had tried to encourage a board member to make some changes in her leadership style the day before. These were changes I didn't want to bring up, but I knew that this person and the church would be harmed if they were not made. I was at the bottom of my emotional barrel. Our church met in a school, and my basement seconded as my office. A board meeting was scheduled to meet in thirty minutes, and board members would be showing up any time. I remember hearing the first footsteps on the porch and wondering why they didn't ring the bell. I went to open the door to find a plastic grocery bag hanging on the doorknob.

I had been working tirelessly to teach leadership principles to my new board. I had given each board member a pile of material to take home and look over in his or her spare time. I quickly

recognized the contents in the plastic bag. It was the material I had given the board member I had tried to spur on. My heart sank. She wasn't going to follow my leadership. My sense of failure was crushing.

The package contained a scathing letter accusing me of everything from legalism to being young. As I read the letter, I lay across my desk and wept in prayer, asking God for help. In that moment I let go of all pretense. I was no great leader. I was a kid playing grown-up in a very difficult world. I was arrogant but had no skills to back it up. For all my book knowledge, I was lacking what these people needed. I wasn't their resource. God was. I wasn't my family's resource. God was. And in those moments of desperation, I begged God just to get me through that night. "Give me what I need to breathe for a few minutes." I had quit managing tomorrow and had desperately fallen on my face before God for just enough sustenance to get through today.

I was learning what Jesus meant when He called us to pray for "daily bread."

As painful as it was, it was the beginning of the most freeing spiritual journey of my life. I was learning to live on manna. I was learning that I didn't control tomorrow and that I didn't have any resource to count on other than God. God's presence and His provision for today were going to have to be sufficient for me to trust Him with the journey.

## **Dependent on Miracles**

When Jesus taught the disciples to pray in Matt. 6, He told them to pray, "Give us today our daily bread." That's wonderful when it is taken as just a poetic sentiment intended to elevate our understanding of a gracious God. But it is an entirely different matter when God allows us to face the terrifying reality of *needing* daily bread. And yet, during those times God can use

such harsh realities to begin a transformation in our hearts that will free us to trust Him beyond our circumstances.

Jesus is reminding us of the kind of absolute dependence on the miraculous hand of God that the children of Israel had to accept in order to survive the harsh realities of their journey to the Promised Land. They had left Egypt. As horrific as the conditions in Egypt had been, the Israelites were at least provided some kind of nourishment. But in the desert, there was no captor to feed them. There was no one but God.

Only a couple of months had gone by on the Israelites' journey before they ran out of resources and began to panic. "It would have been better if we had just stayed in Egypt. We're going to starve if we keep following You." (See Exod. 14:12.) I realize it is tempting to take a self-righteous stand here and accuse the Israelites of having little faith. After all, this group had just witnessed the Passover. God had freed them as no army ever could, and He had struck down the firstborn of all those who refused to become a part of this family of faith. Through a series of miraculous plagues, and now through the stunning display of ultimate authority, God had delivered them from a captor they couldn't defeat. They had seen the mighty hand of God and were now complaining that He was not able to care for them on the very journey He had ordained.

Before we lower the gavel and pass judgment, we must take a look at our own lives and honestly admit we have much in common with the children of Israel. We know the hand of God. He has performed miracle upon miracle in our lives. And yet, when faced with the harsh realities of life and the truth that we don't have what we think we need, we are just as prone to begin accusing God of falling short on His end of the bargain: "After all I have sacrificed, I can't believe You'd let me go through this!"

We are all very fortunate that God is gracious and patient. He provided a solution for the Israelites, and that solution is a pattern for us to follow. God's solution was manna. He provided for the needs of the Israelites, not through huge storehouses of grain and meat, but through the daily provision of "just enough."

For forty years the Israelites would experience a daily miracle. God would provide manna for them to eat. Every morning they awoke to find God's provision of wonderful bread with the taste of honey. Each family was to gather enough to eat in a day. They were not to gather more than a day's supply except for the day before the Sabbath. They would be required to trust God each and every day for the provision.

This is where the most difficult emotional decision comes into play. Do we trust God with tomorrow? Can we really believe that just because He provided for us today, He is going to come through again in the morning? After all, our very lives are on the line here! If God doesn't come through, we're going to starve.

And so the temptation becomes real and vicious. We reason that it is wise to gather as much as we can, just in case God fails us. We enjoy provision. But we detest *daily* provision. We love it when God pours out so many blessings on us that we don't have room enough for them (see Mal. 3). We just don't like it when He pours out those blessings one day at a time.

This is at the heart of Jesus' instructions. Pray for the ability to trust the Blessing Giver more than the blessings. Enjoy the blessings. Praise God for the blessings. But never replace your trust in the Blessing Giver with a trust in the blessings. This whole spiritual journey is about learning that we are safe regardless of the circumstances. We must learn that the miracles of God come in daily portions and that we don't have to have what

we need for tomorrow to know He is going to take care of tomorrow. We must learn the trust of daily provision.

## No Reserves

Trusting in God's daily provision means refusing to trust in reserves. Some of the children of Israel gathered more than a day's provision. Hoarding manna just in case God failed was an incredible slap in God's face. Like Abraham, the children of Israel were trying to create an Ishmael—a plan B. “Just in case You don't provide the way to fulfill Your promises, God, I'm going to create a plan B as a backup.” The extra manna of the Israelites rotted and filled with maggots. This is the destiny of all our plan Bs.

We are all tempted at this point. We discover God's will for our lives and look at the risks involved. While we may never admit it, we ask the honest question, “What if God fails me?” “What will I need to stay safe if God doesn't come through?” And then we start gathering the resources we need for our backup plan. And when we have finally gathered enough, we look at God and say, “I'm ready!”

The problem is we aren't usable when we need a plan B to be safe. God can't use us until we are willing to follow Him into the unknown. In order to use us to transform the world around us, God needs us absolutely dependent on Him. He needs us to let go of whatever crutches we are leaning on and shift the weight of our trust onto His faithfulness. Jesus is calling us to pray for a kind of faith that doesn't need a pile of reserves before we are willing to begin the journey.

Whatever journey God is calling you to, waking up to His daily provision will either be terrifying or invigorating. A part of us says, “Wow! Wouldn't it be amazing to wake up and find manna on the lawn? Wouldn't it be wonderful to live every day experiencing the miraculous hand of God?” And yet, we must

remember that to live that way also means being willing to go to bed at night with nothing left in the proverbial cupboards. The resources for today, as precious as they were, are gone. In the end, our money, our prestige, our energy, our abilities—all of it means nothing. And we have to go to bed tonight making a decision of faith: “Do we trust God to come through tomorrow?”

If we can finally break through to this spiritual victory and savor the prayer, “Give us today our daily bread,” then the morning becomes something to anticipate rather than to dread. We don’t walk out the front door wondering whether God came through. We walk out expecting to see what God has done today to meet our needs. It changes the way we deal with adversity and scarcity. We are no longer at risk. We may not know how God is going to provide, but we do know He is going to do it.

### **What Do We Want—Entertainment or Transformation?**

If we are going to be able to make this spiritual transformation to living on God’s daily provision, we have got to make up our minds about what we want from God. How many times have we said things such as, “If only I could see a miracle, I would believe,” or “God, just show me a miracle and I will follow You.” We all want to see the miracles of God. We just don’t want to *need* the miracle.

Although we are going to explore this topic more deeply in chapter 5, right now we need to recognize one of the major areas that keep us from embracing God’s provision: What we really want is to be entertained by the miracles of God when what we need is to be transformed by them.

We enjoy watching God perform miracles. We just don’t want to be the blind man or the leper. We want to stand on the sidelines where there is no risk. But we don’t want to be the lame man who lived for decades begging for food. We want to be



a spectator in the grandstands cheering our team to victory. But we really don't want to know the pain of need.

But Jesus is calling us to accept God's design for our spiritual transformation. We can be entertained on the sidelines, but we can only experience God's miraculous power when our absolute need for Him is revealed and we cry out for help. To pray for daily bread is to welcome every part of the journey God leads us through—even the painful parts. Those are the times when we look with expectation: "God, what are You going to show me through this? How are You going to transform me? How will Your miraculous hand provide a way of escape here? How is my faith going to be stretched during these days in the wilderness?"

We must learn dependence for today. We must learn to trust God for tomorrow. And in this "daily bread" kind of faith, we must learn that our need is simply the pathway through which God will deliver His miracle. If we are to experience His hand, we are going to *need* His hand. And so regardless of the kind of blessings He pours out on us, we must choose to trust God, not the blessings. We must refuse to allow our trust in God to be determined by the abundance of the provision. We must also refuse to curse God because we are in want. Instead, we must embrace our need for God, no matter how He delivers His blessings.

## One Provider

Getting to the place where we trust God more than His blessings will require that we hold on to God as our only provider. In the same way the children of Israel had no other resource to provide for them, we must place God in our hearts and minds as the one true resource of our lives.

We are tempted to trust our money, our abilities, our relationships, and a host of other things to keep us safe. They are the things we turn to when we are in trouble. We are in fact creating

idols out of those resources. We trust them for our safety and turn to them as our first line of defense. But to live on manna means to refuse to buy into the myth that anything other than God has the ability to keep us safe.

We will deal with this further in chapter 3. But for now, we must admit to ourselves that we do not always trust God more than our money, our wisdom, our abilities, our families, and so on. We don't turn to God first when we are in trouble. We each have a host of resources that we would prefer to rely on instead of God. And God wants to see that change.

This is a mental battle we fight in times of plenty and want. When there is an overabundance of resources to meet our needs, we are tempted to trust the resources more than the God who provided them. When there seem to be too few resources, we are tempted to accuse God of losing sight of our needs and not paying the kind of attention we expect.

When we choose to pray, "Give us today our daily bread," we choose to believe God is going to come through. We refuse to accept what we see around us: "There isn't enough time, money, energy, love, forgiveness, whatever! But somehow, someway, God is going to provide! I'm not going to panic. Yes, I am going to pray fervently and call out to God with everything I have. But it isn't because I doubt His ability. It is because I am convinced He is the only one I can trust to take care of this!" The cry of our heart is one of expectation, not accusation. He will come through. We are joining our prayer of faith with God's desire to be our provider.

## **The Questions We Must Answer**

If we are going to break through to this spiritual victory of daily dependence, living on manna, there are some fundamental questions we must answer.

**Is God really there?** This is the question of *belief*. Do we really believe God is here and cares about our needs? Do we really believe He is going to come through? If we do, it will change the way we deal with the realities and difficulties of life. Peace really can be the norm for our lives, even in the middle of chaos, scarcity, and uncertainty.

**What keeps me safe?** This is the question of *provision*. Until we make up our minds that God alone is our provider, we will not be willing to risk absolute trust in God's provision. We must move beyond a limited faith based on what we can see, to a deep faith based on God's presence. What sources of safety have become gods in our lives? In what ways do we need to shift our trust in these other sources of safety back to God?

**Is enough for today enough for me?** This is the question of *values*. What do we value most? Has materialism choked out our ability to experience the deep level of trust modeled in living on manna? Do we need God to show us tomorrow before we will agree to join Him on the journey? Are we willing to live in scarcity if He leads us down that path? Is our trust in God dependent on the level of abundance He provides, or can we agree to follow the One who has no place to lay His head?

**Do I want entertainment or transformation?** We have to make up our minds whether we are going to be spectators or participants in the miracles of God. Do we want transformation in our lives so much that we are willing to allow God to take us into dangerous territory? We must walk with Him through "the valley of the shadow of death" (Ps. 23:4) for us to really know there is no need to fear evil. We can watch others take that journey from afar, but we can only become more like Him if we are willing to endure the trials that lead to transformation.

The chapters to come will lead us through this amazing jour-

ney into absolute dependence on the miraculous hand of God. We will look closely at these questions. When we break through and come to the end of our self-sufficiency and our need to possess tomorrow before we follow God today, we will find His answer to our questions.

The answer is provision, and it is as sweet as honey. We are able to be used by God to transform the world around us, because we are willing to risk trusting God's capacity to provide. We don't need to see tomorrow to walk into it. We don't have to possess the blessing to know it is being poured out on us. This is the kind of faith God uses to part the waters and drop the walls of Jericho. We are ready to experience the blessings of God without the temptation to shift our worship away from the Blessing Giver. Peace is no longer dependent on the circumstances around us but on the God who is in us.

As you explore the pages to come and ask the fundamental questions of living on manna, I want to invite you to an honest conversation with God. Allow Him to dig deep and to reveal to you those places in your relationship with Him where He wants to transform your heart and deepen your dependency on His ability to provide.