

Exodus 16:15–31. (EHV)

When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, “What is it?” because they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, “This is the bread which the LORD has given to you as food to eat. This is what the LORD has commanded: All of them are to gather as much of it as they need to eat. You are to take an omer per person based on the number of people each of you has in your tents.” The Israelites did this, and some gathered more, some less. When they measured it with an omer, the one who gathered more did not have too much, and the one who gathered less did not have too little. All of them gathered as much as they needed to eat. Moses said to them, “No one is to leave any of it until morning.” However, they did not listen to Moses. Some of them left part of it until morning, and it became full of worms and stank. So Moses was angry with them. They gathered it each morning. All of them gathered as much as they needed to eat. When the sun grew hot, it melted away. On the sixth day they gathered twice as much food, two omers for each person, and all the leaders of the community came and reported to Moses. He said to them, “This is what the LORD has said: Tomorrow is a complete rest, a holy sabbath to the LORD. Bake what you want to bake, and boil what you want to boil, but set aside for yourselves all the rest of it to be kept until morning.” So they set it aside until morning as Moses commanded, and it did not stink, and there were no worms in it. Moses said, “Today eat whatever is left over, for today is a sabbath to the LORD. Today you will not find any around the camp. Six days you will gather it, but on the seventh day, the Sabbath, there will not be any.” On the seventh day some of the people went out to gather it, but they did not find any. The LORD said to Moses, “How long will you people refuse to keep my commandments and my instructions? Look, the LORD has given you the Sabbath. Therefore on the sixth day he will give you two days’ worth of bread. All of you are to stay where you are. None of you are to leave your places on the seventh day.” So the people rested on the seventh day. The house of Israel called it manna. It looked like white coriander seed, and it tasted like wafers made with honey.

What’s the strangest or most unique food you’ve ever eaten?

My wife and I hosted an international student for one school year in Wisconsin. He would buy and eat things like dried squid and dried seaweed. I sampled them but I’ve never bought them myself. My wife told me the most unique food she’s ever eaten is sushi. We’ve got some cow’s tongue in our freezer that one of you gave us. We haven’t eaten it yet, but I’m looking forward to it. Maybe that will be the most unique food we’ve eaten once we get around to it. What’s yours?

After the Israelites had been journeying from their former home in Egypt for a month, they came to the Wilderness of Sin, near the western branch of the Red Sea. Starting here in Exodus Chapter 16 and lasting until they entered the Promised Land more than forty years later in Joshua Chapter 5, the Israelites ate perhaps the most unique food anyone has ever eaten—manna, bread from heaven.

At the beginning of this chapter, we're told that the entire Israelites community grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness: "If only we had died by the LORD'S hand in the land of Egypt, when we sat around pots of meat and ate as much food as we wanted, but now you have brought us out into this wilderness to have this whole community die of hunger." How quickly they forgot the bitterness of their slavery! How quickly they forgot how God had delivered them from the Egyptian army through the Red Sea! How quickly they forgot how God had already miraculously provided water for them to drink!

But instead of responding to their anger and grumbling with anger and grumbling of his own, the Lord wanted to show them grace and generosity and thereby not just to teach them to trust in him and to obey him, but to make them want to. So he told Moses that he was going to give them meat in the evening, which would not be a repeating occurrence, and bread the following morning and all the mornings thereafter, with some important exceptions.

And that's what happened: That evening quail came and covered the camp, and so they were able to go out and gather meat to the extent that they were able to kill and harvest the quail. Then dew settled around the camp that night, so that there was a layer of dew when they got up in the morning, and when the dew evaporated, there was this fine, scale-like thing, as fine as hoarfrost. And the Israelites asked, "*Man hoo?* What is it?"

And Moses told them, "This is the bread which the LORD has given to you as food to eat." It was what the Israelites later called manna.

Now scholars have spent years trying to figure out what this "bread" could have been. It is often thought to be the secretions of a scale insect, which feeds parasitically on tamarisk trees that grow in that area of the world, because those secretions have been used for human consumption and fit some of the descriptions of this "bread" here and in the book of Numbers, especially its sweetness and color.

But if we look carefully at the Bible's description of manna, we see that it defies any attempts to give it a purely naturalistic explanation. The Lord himself describes it as bread rained down from heaven. The psalms describe it as both "the bread of heaven" and "the bread of angels" (Ps. 105:40; 78:25), indicating that the Israelites could identify no other origin for it except heaven. Numbers 11 says that it came down with the dew at night, so that it was available for harvesting in the morning. It first appeared when Moses said it would appear on this occasion and it stopped appearing only after the Israelites reached the Promised Land, and it always appeared wherever they camped. And it fed the entire Israelite camp, which at least at one point numbered more than 600,000 males twenty and older, not including women and children, so that the entire assembly easily numbered in the millions—and they ate it until they were full every day. It could be ground in a handmill or crushed in a mortar, just like grain, and it was baked or boiled or made into cakes. Here it says it was white, but since the Bible also compares it to coriander seed and to resin, it may have been a dull white. Here it says it tasted like wafers made with honey. In Numbers it says it tasted like a dainty or delicacy made with oil. When the sun grew hot, it would melt away, but it would be there again the next morning.

But perhaps the two most interesting characteristics it had show how closely it was tied to the Lord's word. First, the Lord told everyone to gather this bread using an omer measure, a container holding about two quarts, and that they were to gather an omer per person based on the

number of people they had in their tents. And when people followed the Lord's word and gathered it with the omer measure in this way, they always had enough for everyone in their tent.

Second, the Lord told them not to leave any of it until morning, except that they were to gather twice as much on Fridays, so that they could rest on Saturdays, which was also their day of worship. In fact, besides the fact that the Lord rested on the very first Saturday of creation week, this was the first time that the concept of the Sabbath was introduced to the Israelites. God would later spell out the Sabbath regulations explicitly when he gave them the Ten Commandments, but he introduces the Sabbath to them here. When the people disobeyed the Lord's instructions and tried to keep some of it until the next day during the week, it became full of worms and stank. But when people gathered twice as much on Fridays so that they could eat without working on Saturday, the Sabbath day, it did not stink and there were no worms in it. And there was no manna available for them on Saturday. It reminds us what Jesus told the devil in the wilderness, "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord."

There is no way to explain this bread in a naturalistic way. It was truly bread from heaven. It was not only miraculously provided from heaven, but it taught the people to trust in the word of the Lord of heaven.

We can certainly learn some lesser and practical lessons from the Lord's provision of this bread from heaven. For one thing, the Lord doesn't just provide us with the absolute bare necessities. In the 1999 movie *The Matrix*, when the main character has his first meal aboard the flying ship with his crewmates, one of his crewmates pulls a lever on a pipe along the wall to fill up his bowl with some gloop. It doesn't look appealing. It doesn't taste appealing. But another of his crewmates tells him, "It's a single-celled protein combined with synthetic aminos, vitamins, and minerals—everything the body needs." And that's supposed to satisfy the main character and make him enjoy his meal more. The Lord doesn't do that; he doesn't just give us all the vitamins and minerals we need and say, "There. Be happy." Just as when he gave the Israelites bread, he gave them a bread that was like a delicacy with the hint of honey and oil, so also he provides for us in such a way that we get a lot of gravy on top.

At the end of this chapter, the Lord had Moses tell Aaron to preserve an omer of manna as a memorial for the Israelites. It was either placed in front of the Ten Commandments inside the Ark of the Covenant, or it was possibly placed in front of the Ark of the Covenant itself. It's good for us to keep reminders of God's provision around us too, so that we can be reminded of his grace and power when times are lean and tough. As a congregation, we usually do that at anniversaries by printing a special memorial booklet that details the history of our congregation, so that we can be reminded of how God has blessed and preserved us in the past. Maybe we do that in our homes with photo albums, or a specially framed Bible passage or Bible-based poem. Maybe it would be good for some of us to think of a way to memorialize how God kept us safe during the storm a couple weeks ago—maybe by taking part of a tree that came down and turning it into a cross or some other symbol that will help us recall the Lord's kindness.

It should also make us think of how we use our time and treasures in accordance with God's word. We no longer have any explicit command from the Lord to rest and worship on Saturday, but he does tell us to gather together regularly with fellow believers around his word,

and to love to do so, and to do so all the more as we see the Last Day getting closer. I'm never quite sure how to balance the fact that God wants us all to assemble for worship regularly with the fact that he also provides for us through our work, and for some of us, there are certain seasons where that work is more demanding than at other times of the year. I know the main thing he's concerned with is the heart, so we shouldn't be looking for ways to use our work as an excuse to miss church. But I also have known and heard of many Christians who have said, "It's Sunday, and I'm going to church to worship my Savior, and God will take care of the cows and the crops and the commerce"—and he always has, 100% of the time.

Same with our offerings. God no longer gives us any explicit command to give him ten percent of our income. But he does tell us to give a willing, generous, and regular amount in keeping with our income. And it would be easy for us, like the Israelites, to ignore his word and keep more for ourselves, because who knows if we'll have money tomorrow? We don't trust that he'll actually give to us and provide for us way more generously than we could ever give to him. We forget that God knows how to make our money get worms and spoil on us, so as to teach us to trust in him. We forget that we don't live on food and money alone; we live on God's word. So we shouldn't be surprised if we find that our pockets get holes in them when we ignore his word and keep more for ourselves. And on the other hand, once again, I have never known a single Christian who has put God's promises in this regard to the test, and has been left destitute. They have always been able to provide for their family. And I wonder how many of their ignorant neighbors keep wondering how they are always able to get by and why they always seem to be content and happy, while they themselves can't seem to keep hold of everything they frantically clutch at.

But the biggest lesson here is not a moral one to imitate; it is one to believe. As we heard in the Gospel, Jesus tells us he is the true bread from heaven. He is the true manna. He is the ultimate demonstration of God's provision, not feeding our bodies but feeding our souls, not giving us life for forty years, or even for seventy, eighty, or ninety years on earth, but eternal life in heaven.

Just as manna was a demonstration of God's grace and generosity, so Jesus is the ultimate demonstration. While the people were grumbling, God provided manna for them. And while we were still ungodly sinners, Christ died for us. He paid for all our sins without our asking it, without our deserving it. As the manna was new every morning, so are his mercies.

Just as manna taught the people to listen to God's word and taught them the truth of God's word, so Jesus is the ultimate manifestation of God's word. He is the Word made flesh. He fulfilled all of God's promises, even when it involved dying and rising from the dead. The devil's head is crushed. We are reconciled to God and innocent in his sight. And Jesus continues to fulfill all of God's promises in our lives every day. Whoever trusts in him will never be put to shame.

Just as manna enabled the people to enjoy Sabbath rest, so Jesus gives us the true Sabbath rest—the rest of knowing all our sins are forgiven; the rest of knowing that heaven is already ours through his work, and that there is nothing we can or have to do to earn it; the rest of knowing that, in all the events of the world, God is not against us, but for us; the eternal rest from all labor and toil that he is preparing for us in glory.

Yes, this bread from heaven in the Old Testament was meant to point the Israelites and us to the true Bread from heaven, Jesus Christ. “Amen, Amen, I tell you: Moses did not give you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the real bread from heaven. For the bread of God is the one who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world” (John 6:32–33).

Yes, Jesus, through your gift of faith in you, give us this bread all the time. Amen.