



How Maggots Stink Up the Manna

Exodus 16:1-30
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Let's begin with the title of our message for this morning. I know it's a little raw for a sermon title, but the words do come from right out of the text. Sometimes the Bible gets a little raw when getting a point across requires. Our text finds the Israelites in the desert wasteland having been liberated from their bondage to the Egyptians exactly one month prior. For one month they have been wandering toward some vague Promised Land and the stores of food they took with them are beginning to run low—so low that they are beginning to grumble against their leaders.

In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death" (Verse 3). Isn't that a fancy bit of revisionist history! They make it sound like life in Egypt was a picnic. But slavery is no picnic. How soon the people forget.

As it is written about that period in the land of bondage: *The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them* (Exodus 2:23-25). In one short month the Israelites have gone from groaning to grumbling. That is what dwindling resources in a desert wasteland will do for you.

But hadn't God just brought them out of Egypt with miraculous plagues? Had he not just separated the waters of the Red Sea for them? Had he not performed wonder after wonder on their behalf? Yes, but that was last month. As one pop song puts it: "What have you done for me lately?" What a fickle faith these people have in a God who has promised to protect them and provide for them always. As it happens, God requires more than a fickle faith to protect and provide, so his next act of fancy footwork comes with a test of their faith.

Overnight dew covered the ground as usual, but when it evaporated away in the morning sun it left behind these thin flakes of what appeared to be frost on the ground.

But it wasn't frost; it was an edible substance like bread. The people asked: "Manna," which in the Egyptian languages means "what is it?" Manna, as it became known, was bread from heaven sent to nourish the people along with flocks of quail sent as meat and water gushing from rocks struck by Moses staff.

The trick, or test if you will, was to gather only enough for each day's need—an omer per person, or about two quarts. In this way the people would cultivate a complete dependence upon God for their daily bread, which beats a fickle faith any day. Each day they would be reminded that the Lord provides for his own. All the people had to do to demonstrate their faith was to gather one omer of Manna per person each day and trust God to provide the next day. Oh, and to preserve the Sabbath as a day of rest, they could gather twice as much on the day before so they would have it to eat that day and the next.

Now do you suppose the people trusted God for their daily bread? Apparently there were some who could not resist gathering more than an omer and hoarding it away in secret. *However some of them paid no attention to Moses; they kept part of it until morning, but it was full of maggots and began to smell. So Moses was angry with them* (Verse 20). But what about the double portion the people could gather on the day before the Sabbath? *So they saved it until morning, as Moses commanded, and it did not stink or get maggots in it* (Verse 24). That was good because no Manna was to be found on the morning of the Sabbath.

Following God's Word and obeying his instructions makes all the difference between whether what we gather feeds and nourishes our lives or whether it spoils and stinks and defiles our lives. I think it is instructive to note how God seeks a balance in our gathering. On the one hand we are told to gather something and not be idle with our time and energies and talents. On the other hand we are told not to gather beyond measure.

Solomon was the richest man in the world in his time and knew the limits of gathering beyond measure. In the book of Proverbs he prayed to the Lord for balance: *Give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, 'Who is the Lord?' Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God* (Proverbs 30:8-9). Too little and we steal, but too much and we become prideful and forget about our daily dependence on God.

Of course Solomon did not have to gather Manna. It ceased to appear the day God's people crossed over the Jordan into the Promised Land. But Solomon did know a thing or two about gathering wealth, being as rich as he was. He also wrote another interesting thing about gathering wealth. *I have seen a grievous evil under the sun: wealth hoarded to the harm of its owner* (Ecclesiastes 5:13). Can you imagine being harmed by too much wealth? I don't think this is a message we get from the world. But it is a message we get from God's Holy Word, and often in rather raw form.

James, the biological brother of Jesus and Pastor of the Mother Church in Jerusalem had some rather raw words to say about rotting riches to those who gathered wealth beyond measure. *Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you. Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered innocent men, who were not opposing you* (James 5:1-6).

Well, that is “How Maggots Stink Up the Manna” and we would do well to pay attention to God’s Word in our day as those who live in the richest nation on earth. That is not our only distinction by the way. We, along with other rich countries, also consume more antidepressants than poorer nations raising concerns among, if you can believe it, psychiatrists. Further, right here in the land of freedom we incarcerate a greater percentage of our population than any other nation on the face of the earth. Well, not only is *wealth hoarded to the harm of its owner*, it is hoarded at the expense of others less fortunate—which explains how the disparity of wealth in our land has consistently increased each of the past 30 years.

Balance is the key that keeps wealth from spoiling, stinking, rotting and corroding to use biblical terms. Every week we recite Jesus’ prayer that asks God to “give us this day our daily bread.” P. J. Wingate said: “‘Give us this day our daily bread’ is probably the most perfectly constructed and useful sentence ever set down in the English language.” Let us struggle with what that means for us as we come to this table praying to God: Break thou the bread of life, dear Lord to me.”