

# It's Raining Bread

By Brad Allison on 8/24/2003

Scripture Reference *Exodus 16*

The children of Israel find themselves in the middle of a desert. They had been promised a land flowing with milk and honey, and what they get instead is a place of deprivation. Both their water and food has now been used up, and they don't know where more will come from. What's more, the very God who had promised them the land flowing with milk and honey is the one who has led them here. All they were doing was following the glory cloud that guided them wherever they went, and he had brought them to this place.

Why does God do that to his people? He still does, you know. We come to him in faith, thinking perhaps that now life will be a picnic at the beach. But it doesn't take long to discover that life with God does include a sandy environment, but it's the sand of the desert instead of the beach. And it's not just the absence of minor conveniences. We find ourselves being without those things we always considered essential for living, just like food and water were essential for Israel in the desert. Why did God lead them here, and why does he do it to us too? Wouldn't it be easier to go straight from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land of milk and honey? Why does life have to pass through a desert?

The answer lies in understanding the fact that suffering is a necessary part of our lives. Have you ever known anyone who seems to live a sheltered, untroubled life? Everything always seems to go well for that person. They're smart, attractive, rich and successful in everything. Without some kind of suffering, such people inevitably become shallow. I heard recently that Warren Buffet, the second richest man in the world, has decided not to leave his fortune to his children when he dies. His reason is that he believes it would ruin them, and he loves them too much to ruin them.

Illustration: I understand that when the queen bee lays her eggs, she lays each egg in a six-sided cell that is filled with enough pollen and honey to feed the bee until it reaches a certain stage of maturity. The top is then sealed with a capsule of wax. When the bee has exhausted its supply of nourishment, it wrestles and struggles to get through that wax seal. The opening is so narrow that in the agony of exit, the bee rubs off the membrane that encases its wings. Thus, when it finally does emerge, it is able to fly! One beekeeper tells of noticing a time when a moth got into the hive and devoured the wax capsules. As a result, the young bees crawled out without any effort or trouble. But they couldn't fly. Soon the mature insects, seeing the pitiful, unproductive state of the new arrivals, instinctively proceeded to sting them to death.

God leads his children into the wilderness because he knows that there is no better school for them. For example, one of my constant needs is to translate my formal theology into my working theology. I find that I constantly know more than I practice. I could answer the following question accurately: "True or False - God will take care of me always." But I still worry. My formal theology is good, but my working theology is defective. It is suffering in the desert that brings the two into alignment. So I want us to look today at life in the desert, and consider two simple points: our instinct in the wilderness and God's provision in the wilderness.

## I. Out Instinct in the Wilderness

The children of Israel now find themselves in a desert with empty stomachs and no prospect for their next meal. What is their response? You might expect them to say, "We are hungry, but the Lord is going to take care of us. Within the last month, he has delivered us from the avenging angel on the night of Passover, from Pharaoh's entire army when he had us pinned against the Red Sea, and, more recently, from our urgent need for water. We don't see how he can provide food for us in this desert, but we didn't see how he was going to provide for us the first three times either. So we don't need to know beforehand how he will provide; we need only to trust

him.” That’s what you would have said, right?

Here’s what they actually say. “Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger” (v. 3). In other words, “There’s no way out of this; we’re going to die, and it’s going to be awful. We’re going to die from hunger, which is far worse than what happened to the Egyptians when the angel slew the firstborn. Their outcome is better than ours.”

In our sin, we instinctively think that we deserve more from God than he is giving us. Listen to Charlie Jones’ analogy of a baby to help us see the absurdity of this. He writes this in reference to Eve’s desire for more from God when she fell to the temptation to eat the forbidden fruit, but it applies to the complaining of the Israelites in the desert as well.

Imagine that you have given birth to a baby who can talk within a few hours of delivery. You bring your bundle of joy home and place him in his crib. The baby spends a few minutes looking around and then announces, “Thanks for the crib, toys, bedroom and such, but you’re not really giving me everything that will make me a complete, self-actualized baby.” (This kid has a great vocabulary!!) The baby stands up in the crib and not only demands that you give him more than what he’s got, but he also accuses you of holding back some very important information about the household. He chastises you, “I see you have a great kitchen in there, but you haven’t even told me where to find the Sugar Smacks! And that TV in the next room you didn’t show me how to use the remote, did ya, huh? Listen, if I am gonna live in this place, you better start letting me in on some of this secret knowledge. I have just as much right as you do to have all the household knowledge and the secret passwords to the AOL account. And, oh, by the way, I need you to feed me, clothe me, take total care of me and, uh... I just made a mess in my diaper; you should change me real soon.” (*Peculiar Favor*, p. 174)

Do you have a complaining heart? If you’ve never seen this instinct within yourself, let me give you an assignment. Try to make it through this week without complaining at all, even if it’s just in your heart, and without self-pity. Self-pity is just another form of a complaining heart. Don’t complain about the politicians. Don’t complain about your teachers or your parents. Don’t complain about your spouse, other drivers, colleagues at work, bodily aches and pains, insufficient money or about Microsoft Windows. Maybe you’re thinking to yourself, “Wait a minute; it’s okay to complain about those things. It’s just God I’m not supposed to complain about.” If you look at what the Israelites said, their complaint was against Moses. But Moses makes it clear in his response that their real complaint is against the Lord. What is our instinct in the wilderness of life? It is to complain.

## II. God’s Provision in the Wilderness

God provides manna for them. This manna came in the form of dew early in the morning, and after it was gathered, it could be made into something like bread. Its taste is described for us in verse 31: “It was like coriander seed, white, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey.” Commentators have pointed out the contrast between God’s supply of food to Israel in the desert and the plagues upon Egypt. Though the land of Egypt was a fertile valley, under the judgment of God it became as a desert. God sent hail that destroyed the plants and then locusts to eat what the hail had left. The fertile valley became a desert. Now, the desert becomes a place that is so fertile that it begins raining bread from the sky. Here’s what that teaches. The best of all possible circumstances in life, without God, is like a desert. There is only death there. But the place of greatest need, where the circumstances are the worst, with God’s presence, becomes a place of life and richness.

How does this apply to us? When you’re in the wilderness, God always provides, just as he provided for Israel here. In a sermon he preached on this passage, Tim Keller pointed out how the Israelites were required to do something in order to benefit from this food. God put it on the ground, not directly into their stomachs. They had to gather it and prepare it before eating it. In the same way, God feeds us in the wilderness, but there are some things we have to do in order to benefit from God’s food. We have to gather it and prepare it as well. There are three ways in which we gather the manna in order to feed ourselves during our desert times.

The first way is suggested by Moses’ comments on this incident later in his life. In Deuteronomy 8, he

said, "And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord" (v. 3). God feeds us with his word, and we take in his word by a process of meditation and faith. If you are going to benefit from the food of God while you're in the desert, you're going to have to think and meditate on God's word. It doesn't come to you automatically, but through this process. Let me give you an example. I was recently thinking about the command found in Philippians 4:4 - "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice." In order to feed yourself from that word, you have to think about it. As I was thinking about this particular command recently, I considered the fact that God never commands what he doesn't also enable. So God has given me the spiritual resources for joy in my life. Then I thought, he tells me to do this always, even during the sorrowful times. There must be something about this commanded joy that persists through all circumstances. It must be the kind of joy we read of Jacob as he worked for Laban for the promise of being able to marry Laban's daughter, Rachel. Though he had to work seven years for her, labor Jacob was later to describe as unjust affliction, we read that these seven years of hardship "seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her" (Gen. 29:20). The joy God commands is the joy of the person who is told that he has been left with an inheritance \$100 million, but he has to wait one year before claiming it, and the year turns out to be one of financial difficulty. But through it all, he smiles knowingly at his bright future whenever anyone mentions his difficulties. We have joy because we are loved and because our future is a bright one. God tells us in this passage from Philippians that if we but knew all that is ours in Christ, we would rejoice our way through each day. We are fed as we think through that.

There is a second way we benefit from God's food for us in the desert. We can see what it is when we understand what is being said in verses 17-18. As they went out to gather, some were better gatherers than others. Some would have had younger backs that could bend more easily and quickly. Some would have bigger hands that would hold more each time they grabbed some manna. Some people just work faster and harder than others. But then they would bring it all together and put it in a big communal pile, and take a one-omer measure (equal to about 2 quarts) and give each family a one-omer measure for each person. When they finished, each person had their one omer, and there was none left over. What does this teach us? It teaches that if you're going to be fed in the wilderness, you need to be connected to the people of God. There are a number of reasons why you may not be very good yet at gathering manna. But there are others who are good at it, and they are able to share with you so that you can be fed in wilderness. God has never intended that you try to make it through the desert times of your life all by yourself. You need to be in community with others.

A third way in which we are strengthened in the wilderness is through a relationship with God. Remember that they had to gather this food every day except the Sabbath day. God didn't set up some big storage silos into which he would pour a year's worth of manna. He gave them only enough for one day at a time, except for the sixth day when he gave two-days worth. What this signifies is that God is inviting us into a relationship with him.

Illustration: Imagine someone meets a poor orphan and wants to make sure the orphan is supplied with enough food. He thinks, "I could just go down to the restaurant near where he lives and put \$100,000 on his account. That should take care of him for the next fifteen years or so." But then he realizes he would never see him, so he decides on another way. He invites him into his dining room and points to an empty chair. He says, "Do you see that chair? That's your chair. We eat three meals a day here, and you are invited to eat all three with us." If the man wants a relationship with the orphan, this is far superior, because he will see him regularly. That's what God has done with us. He says to you, "There's always a chair for you at my table. You are always welcome to eat with me."

Let me say this another way. The food God has for you in the desert is ultimately that of Jesus himself. Remember that Jesus identified himself as the food that comes out of heaven. "I am the bread of life... who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world" (John 6:33, 35). We feed on him by faith when we understand that God accepts us only through Jesus. There's an interesting pointer to Jesus in this very passage. In verse 4, we read that God set up this situation as a test for Israel. But then, we read that all they ever did was to fail the test. It is God's response to their failure that is interesting. They failed the test first in verse 3, when they responded to their need through complaining and grumbling. God's response is recorded in verse 4: "Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Behold, I am about to rain bread from heaven for you.'" What kind of test is this? They fail and God treats them as if they had passed. They failed again when he told them not to keep any from one day to the next and again when they were told not to go out on the Sabbath day to gather. God's response is only to keep giving them bread. The only one God seems displeased with is Moses. "And the Lord to Moses, 'How long will you refuse to keep my commandments and my laws?'" (v. 28). It doesn't seem quite fair, does

it? The people sin, and Moses gets the blame. Moses is a picture of Jesus here. We sin and Jesus gets the blame. Jesus is righteous, and we get the credit. That is the food that nourishes us in the desert. God is pleased with you in Jesus.

### CONCLUSION:

In old age, Pierre Auguste Renoir, the great French painter, suffered from arthritis, which twisted and cramped his hand. His friend, Henri Matisse, watched sadly while Renoir, grasping a brush with only his fingertips, continued to paint even though each movement caused stabbing pain. One day, Matisse asked Renoir why he persisted in painting at the expense of such torture. Renoir replied, "The pain passes, but the beauty remains." The pain of your desert experience will pass, but the beauty of God's feeding you with the gospel will remain forever. May God help you to feed on Jesus today!