

Heavenly Manna

*“The children of
Israel did eat
manna forty years,
until they came to
a land inhabited;
they did eat
manna, until they
came unto the
borders of the land
of Canaan.”
—Exodus 16:35*

EVERY MORNING IN MANY

parts of the world, dedicated Christians open a little book called *Daily Heavenly Manna* to read a devotional Scripture text and comments for that day. The selections are very precious, and often have been read so many times over the years that they are familiar to the reader. If you do

not presently have a copy of this wonderful devotional book, please see our offer which appears on the inside front cover of *The Dawn* magazine.

Just as nutritionists tell us that a healthy breakfast is important for beginning each day, so this bread from heaven is intended to give us a good spiritual start each morning. The word “manna” comes to us by way of the experiences of Israel as recorded in the Old Testament. It was an all-important food to the Israelites, being the mainstay of their diet during their forty years in the wilderness.

DELIVERANCE FROM EGYPT

Israel had been enslaved by Egypt for hundreds of years. When God’s due time came, he chose Moses

to lead them to freedom, and to establish them as a nation in their own land. Pharaoh, however, would not allow the Israelites to leave. Finally, after a series of dire plagues upon Egypt, climaxing in the death of all the Egyptian firstborn—from Pharaoh's own son to that of the lowliest slave—Pharaoh consented to their departure. Once they were gone, however, he again changed his mind, pursuing them with his army to the brink of the Red Sea. The Israelites were extremely fearful of being captured and taken back into bondage once again. They murmured and complained against Moses, claiming that his poor leadership had brought them to such straits. Yet, with God's miraculous help they crossed the Red Sea on dry ground while Pharaoh and his hosts drowned in the depths of the waters.—Exod. chaps. 1-14

Only about a month's time had elapsed after the excitement of the Israelites' remarkable deliverance. They were now safely on the other side, and Pharaoh and his army were dead. Together, the Israelites sang a song of triumph, the beginning of which says: "I will sing unto the LORD, for he hath triumphed gloriously: the horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea. The LORD is my strength and song, and he is become my salvation: he is my God, and I will prepare him an habitation; my father's God, and I will exalt him." (Exod. 15:1,2) This triumphant joy began to fade, however, when they had time to reflect on where they were, what was happening, and the realization that they were traveling through very desolate country.

THE PEOPLE MURMUR

All too soon the Israelites once again showed their lack of gratitude to God and his provisions for them. “The whole congregation of the children of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness: And the children of Israel said unto them, Would to God we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the flesh pots, and when we did eat bread to the full; for ye have brought us forth into this wilderness, to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” (Exod. 16:2,3) Through their murmurings they were rejecting the wonderful provision the Lord had made for their freedom from slavery through the faithful leadership of Moses.

Earlier the Israelites had a life-threatening problem locating water for themselves and their livestock, but the Lord provided water for them. They had come to a place where there were twelve wells, which took care of those problems at the time. (Exod. 15:27) Still there was the matter of finding enough food to satisfy the great multitude of people and their flocks, herds and cattle. In essence they said, “Nobody is here to sell us food; there is no vegetation in this area; how are we going to be able to survive? We will starve to death!”

Again we see the longsuffering of the Heavenly Father—how gracious he was, how patient with this nation who lacked faith. When Moses and Aaron petitioned the Lord for help, he spoke to Moses, saying, “I have heard the murmurings of the children of Israel: speak unto them, saying, At even ye shall eat flesh, and in the morning ye shall be filled with bread; and ye shall know that I am the LORD your God.”—Exod. 16:11,12

GOD PROVIDES FOOD

“It came to pass, that ... in the morning the dew lay around about the host. And when the dew that lay was gone up, behold, upon the face of the wilderness there lay a small round thing, as small as the hoar frost on the ground. And when the children of Israel saw it, they said one to another, It is manna: for they wist not what it was.” We note here that the Hebrew word translated “manna” means “what is it?” Hence the foregoing statement that the people knew “not what it was.” Moses answered their question, saying, “This is the bread which the LORD hath given you to eat”—Exod. 16:13-15

God faithfully provided for Israel, and they should have been satisfied and grateful for his provisions as they journeyed to the land of promise. As noted in our opening text, not a single day passed for forty years that they did not have manna to eat, which would meet their nutritional needs and satisfy their hunger. Without this marvelous, miraculous provision for food they would surely have died in that barren wilderness.

Information is provided to us in the Scriptures concerning what this manna was like. In the verses previously quoted, we are told that it was deposited at night, like the dew. Its color was white, which indicates that it was not a growing tree, plant, grass, grain or herb. (vs. 31) Thus, it was not something that grew out of the earth naturally, as the many green plants God had provided in the beginning for all animals and for man to eat. (Gen. 1:29,30) The fact that the manna was white further illustrates its provision as a direct miracle of God.

In Psalm 78:23-25, it is called “angels’ food.” The thought is that the source of this bread was the Almighty, sent by him to earth through his angels. God “opened the doors of heaven, And had rained down manna upon them to eat, and had given them the corn of heaven. Man did eat angels’ food: he sent them meat [food] to the full.” In Exodus 16:31, manna is described as being “like coriander seed, white; and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey.” Coriander seed is a globular, white, aromatic fruit about the size of a peppercorn. Manna was “like” it, but it was not the coriander seed itself. In another account we are told, “The manna was as coriander seed, and the colour thereof as the colour of bdellium.” (Num. 11:7) Bdellium is thought by some to have been a white aromatic gum or resin from certain balsam trees. Others believe bdellium refers to the white pearl found in oysters. Whichever of these may have actually been referred to in the foregoing verse, bdellium was white, which, we are told, was also the color of the manna.

GATHERING AND PREPARING

It took patience and effort to gather this small, seed-like food every day. We are told: “The people went about, and gathered it, and ground it in mills, or beat it in a mortar, and baked it in pans, and made cakes of it: and the taste of it was as the taste of fresh oil.” (Num. 11:8) This information indicates to us that manna had all the basic ingredients which could be so prepared as to be a satisfying as well as tasty meal. It undoubtedly had a proper balance of carbohydrates, protein, fats, minerals and other sources of nutrition for a healthy diet.

God's instructions were that manna was to be gathered each day, but it was forbidden for the Israelites to gather enough for two days. (Exod. 16:16-19) "Notwithstanding they hearkened not to Moses; but some of them left of it until the [next] morning, and it bred worms, and stank: and Moses was wroth with them." (vs. 20) The exception to this which the Lord made was, that on the day before the Sabbath, they were to gather twice as much for their families as they usually ate in one day's time. Twice as much manna fell, and it did not spoil overnight. It was perfectly proper for them to hold that supply over to the next day. In fact, if one went out on the Sabbath to gather manna, there would be none on the ground.—vss. 22-30

The foregoing details concerning the provision of manna and God's accompanying instructions as to its gathering and preparation constitute proof that it was not a phenomenon of the region. Further, it was not produced in a natural time cycle, since for six days they would find it, and every seventh day there would be none. Most assuredly, this was a tremendous miracle, and without it, the people of Israel would have died.

The Lord had instructed the Israelites to take only the amount they would eat that day. There were perhaps a million or more households and 2-3 million people traveling through the wilderness. (Exod. 12:37; Num. 1:45-47) Under these circumstances, the daily supply of manna found on the ground would no doubt have covered a large area, and the gathering of it by each household had to be accomplished in some orderly manner, so that every family had a sufficient amount on a daily basis, and double the

amount on the day before the Sabbath. The Scriptures do not provide the details as to how all this was accomplished, but we can be assured it was all under the miraculous divine supervision of God. He faithfully provided the people with sufficient food each day for forty years—more than 14,000 days—without fail!

JESUS FEEDS A MULTITUDE

As time passed, the record of God's manifold provisions for the Israelites during their forty years in the wilderness was handed down from one generation to the next. Old Testament writers also often spoke of these things, calling to remembrance God's mighty acts on their behalf, including the great miracle of the manna which was so vital to their very existence. (Deut. 8:3-5; Neh. 9:19-21; Ps. 78:23-25; 105:39-43) Centuries later the Jews referred to its magnitude in response to the miracle Jesus performed when he fed 5,000 people.

The record of this is found in John chapter 6, verses 1-13 and 22-65. Jesus had come to a desert place. Thousands of people followed him because they wanted to hear him speak. As the day wore on they became faint from hunger, but they did not have any food with them. Jesus provided their meal by finding among those in the crowd a boy who had five loaves and some fish. Performing a miracle, Jesus multiplied this small amount of food until enough was provided to satisfy the entire multitude, with twelve full baskets left over for a future meal.

Some were so impressed by this miracle that they reacted by saying, "This is of a truth that prophet that should come into the world." They tried to take

him by force to make him a king, but he quickly escaped and went into a mountain by himself. He skillfully eluded them because he knew that it was not time for him to become a king.—John 6:14,15

Jesus was destined to be Israel's king, but not at that time, because he had come for a different purpose. The multitudes, however, were not to be denied—they sought him and found him the next day. Upon finding him, they said, "Rabbi, when camest thou hither?" Then Jesus told them, "I say unto you, Ye seek me, not because ye saw the miracles, but because ye did eat of the loaves, and were filled. Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life, which the Son of man shall give unto you: for him hath God the Father sealed."—vss. 25-27

Jesus' appeal was to those in the multitude who had hearing ears. There were a few there who would ultimately become his faithful footstep followers, but the great majority were only interested in the fishes and loaves he could provide, and he let them know that he was very much aware of this fact. As a consequence of this line of exchange between the people and Jesus, they responded with words implying that, in their view, the provision of the loaves and the fishes on behalf of several thousand was really not that great a miracle. They compared it to how Moses, for forty years, directed the feeding of over two million people in the wilderness. "Our fathers did eat manna in the desert; as it is written, He gave them bread from heaven to eat."—vs. 31

TRUE BREAD FROM HEAVEN

To this Jesus replied, “Verily, verily, I say unto you, Moses gave you not that bread from heaven; but my Father giveth you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he which cometh down from heaven, and giveth life unto the world.” The people had no comprehension of what the Lord was talking about. When he mentioned the bread from heaven which would bring life, they said, “Lord, evermore give us this bread.” Then Jesus said, “I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst.”—vss. 32-35

Jesus was trying to teach them that the manna in the wilderness was simply a picture, or foregleam, of the true bread of life. He further spoke of this, stating, “I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.” (vs. 51) Jesus knew this was not something they could understand at that time. Indeed, to many his words were difficult to believe at all. It was a “hard saying,” and as a result, “From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked with him no more.”—vss. 60,66

MANNA POINTED FORWARD TO JESUS

Though for a time confused, those who continued to follow Jesus, and who received the enlightenment provided through God’s Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, gained the blessed understanding of Jesus’ words to the multitude. How wonderful it is, too, that God has similarly opened our eyes and ears,

to see and hear, and that we can have an understanding of what Jesus was talking about. We can see the lesson from the beautiful picture of the manna, and how without it we would die. The manna represented Jesus' flesh, sacrificed for the life of the world—his perfect humanity laid down in death for all mankind. Just as God sent down the manna from heaven every day for Israel, so Jesus left his heavenly home and came down to earth to become the true manna—the bread of life—for all who come to him by faith.—John 1:29; 3:16,17; 6:33; Gal. 4:4-6; I John 4:14

As spiritual Israelites, we need our heavenly manna to sustain us as we travel through the wilderness on our journey toward Canaan. Without it we will not be able to survive. There are many lessons to learn from our study of the manna, but the primary one is to appreciate Jesus as our Redeemer. As such, the manna pictures the ransom first and foremost. (Matt. 20:28; I Tim. 2:3-6) Before we can take even the first step on our wilderness journey, we must have an appreciation of the ransom and what it does for us. Indeed, we cannot appreciate it enough, and are unable to fully comprehend what a sacrifice it was for the Heavenly Father to send his Son to earth to die for Adam and his fallen progeny. We are equally incapable of altogether appreciating what it meant for Jesus to lay down his perfect life in order that we might come out from under Adamic condemnation and have the opportunity to find everlasting life.

THE WORD OF GOD

The manna does not represent only the ransom, however. It also denotes all that is contained in the

Word of God. When Jesus told the multitude that he was the “bread of life,” he further explained that it was not his literal flesh that they were to eat. He said, “The flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life.” (John 6:63) The words which he spoke and which we are to “eat” are the words of God contained in the Scriptures.

The importance of God’s Word as our spiritual “manna” is further shown in the experience of Jesus when he was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness after his baptism. The adversary’s first temptation consisted of telling Jesus to turn stones into bread. He was hungry and had not eaten for forty days. Our Lord’s reply to the devil was: “It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.” Jesus was quoting Moses, who was reminding Israel how God had provided manna for them to eat for forty years. (Matt. 4:4) In these words we are reminded how dependent we are on the Word of God for spiritual sustenance.

Let us learn well this all-important and vital lesson of the manna, and take to heart the counsel given by Moses to the Israelites: “All the commandments which I command thee this day shall ye observe to do, that ye may live, and multiply, and go in and possess the land which the LORD swore unto your fathers. And thou shalt remember all the way which the LORD thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness, to humble thee, and to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldst keep his commandments, or no. And he humbled thee, and suffered thee to hunger, and fed thee

with manna, which thou knewest not, neither did thy fathers know; that he might make thee know that man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the LORD doth man live.”—Deut. 8:1-3

When God instituted the provision of manna for the Israelites, he instructed Moses to put a small portion into a golden pot, which was later placed in the ark of the covenant when the Tabernacle arrangement was established. (Exod. 16:32-34; Heb. 9:4) The manna was miraculously preserved in the golden pot, and never spoiled in all the centuries that the Tabernacle was in use. This is a beautiful representation of immortality—divine life—which would be given to those spiritual Israelites of the present age who are faithful in their sojourn toward heavenly Canaan. As we soon enter upon a new year, let us strive ever more diligently to partake daily of the heavenly manna so bountifully provided for our spiritual sustenance and growth. Thus, may these words be fulfilled in us, “To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna,” the incorruptible reward of “glory and honour and immortality, eternal life.”—Rev. 2:17; Rom. 2:7 ■