

An Unheavenly Appetite

⁴The rabble with them began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing and said, "If only we had meat to eat! ⁵We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost - also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. ⁶But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!"

⁷The manna was like coriander seed and looked like resin. ⁸The people went around gathering it, and then ground it in a handmill or crushed it in a mortar. They cooked it in a pot or made it into cakes. And it tasted like something made with olive oil. ⁹When the dew settled on the camp at night, the manna also came down. - Numbers 11:4-9

This is one of the most disappointing episodes in the story of God's dealings with His chosen nation, the Hebrews. It is a story of ingratitude and "unconversion." In the days of Moses, YAHWEH had effected the release of His people from 400 years of slavery and oppression in Egypt. Through the remarkable miracle of the Red Sea, the nation had escaped Pharaoh's chariots and foot soldiers. God had guided His nation through the wilderness by a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. He gave them shoes for wandering in the desert that never wore out. Every day seemed to bring some new and staggering proof of God's provision and care.

One of the most fascinating of these proofs was a miracle of sustenance. Every morning, a food that descended from heaven covered the ground. The people called it "manna," which meant simply "What is it?" The name alone suggested that it was something never seen before. Even the instructions given to the people for gathering the manna were intended to teach them to put their trust in YAHWEH for their provision. Each day, they were to gather only what they needed for the day. If they tried to hoard it for the next day, it became maggot-infested. However, on the sixth day, they were to gather twice as much as on other days, enough to last them through the Sabbath, when they were to rest and not gather any. The surplus gathered on the sixth day would remain fresh for the extra day. Everything about the manna was miraculous.

So, it was sad indeed, and on two levels, when the people began to murmur about this heavenly provision. First, and most obvious, the people's murmuring expressed a profound sense of ingratitude. By romanticizing the past in Egypt and craving the food there, the nation ceased to live in the vivid reality of God's faithfulness. They were acting as if life as slaves had not been so bad. After all, at least there had been variety in their daily diet.

The second level on which this was a sad state of affairs was that it evidenced that they had little appetite for the provisions of God. The tasty produce mentioned in these verses was suggestive of Egypt, which would become a literary metaphor in Scripture for the old life of slavery to sin. They became weary of that which God provided, much like a person today who might make an outward profession of faith in Christ, but who loves to walk on the edge between holiness and old enticements rather than fleeing temptation. These are the people today who are fascinated with the boundaries between morality and immorality because they want to get away with just as much as is tolerable to God.

God's judgment in this instance was to give them what they thought they wanted. He sent quail. That must have seemed like a nice change of pace. Then, He sent more quail, and more quail ... and even more quail. In fact, God told Moses that He would keep sending them quail "for a whole month - until it comes out of your nostrils and you loathe it - because you have rejected the LORD, who is among you, and have wailed before him, saying, 'Why did we ever leave Egypt?' " (verse 20). For a solid month, the Israelites had nothing to eat but quail meat. It didn't always stay fresh and they had to try to preserve it the best they could. If manna got old, quail got much older much faster.

The Hebrews had to learn that God was a better authority on what was best for them than they could ever be for themselves. That's a rather valuable lesson for today's Christian to learn as well. We can look around at the trappings of this world and we can pine after the things we left behind to become Christians, but contentment with what a sovereign Savior has provided us is a much more rewarding way of living over the long haul.

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