

Just What We Need, Just as We Need It

Matthew 6:11

Talk about someone needing a career change! A 38-year-old Minnesota man was clearly working under too much stress. He committed a string of robberies and eventually received eight to ten years in prison. During his crime spree, he was dubbed "The Roloids Robber." Apparently, he would ask clerks for antacid tablets while his felony was in progress. He explained that he needed the antacid because of the stress that came from committing crimes.

Stress can wear anyone down. Even believers tend to get overwhelmed by "this or that," and the imbalance is reflected their prayers. This prayer outline that Jesus gave to His disciples, this *Model Prayer*, keeps our minds in balance while we pray. When frightened, it is seldom any Christian's second nature to muse over how the eternal kingdom of heaven is breaking into this natural world. When obstacles confound the pursuit of his dreams, it is not his first reflex to welcome God's higher will. When his belly is empty, he is not immediately prone to consider the needs of others.

Before *The Disciple's Guide to Better Praying* leads us to turn our attention to asking God for the things we need in order to survive in this life, it reminds us that our Father in heaven is Holy God. It reminds us that the best thing that could ever happen to this old world is that it might become a part of the eternal realm over which Mighty God rules. It reminds us that the most important source of nourishment in our lives is that which feeds our eternal souls, the bread of life, the will of God.

God's holiness, the coming kingdom, the doing of God's will - these are lofty themes, but what do they mean to a hungry man worried about his next meal? Is providing for man's physical needs somehow a secondary concern to God? I don't believe God operates in the realm of primary and secondary concerns. If He cares about a thing, then, it is important - period. The fact that Jesus invites us to address God for something as basic as our "daily bread" establishes the importance of "daily bread." Great things, little things, material things, spiritual things - no matters pertaining to God's plans for man abide outside the scope of His care. So why, if it is not a matter of relative importance to God, should petitions for our needs follow reflections upon God and His kingdom?

One answer may be that prayer sequence is a way that Jesus teaches His disciples, then and now, to not always be putting their own concerns at the top of every list under heaven, but I think there is more. Think about it. Before you ask for anything in prayer, can you not see a value in spending some time reflecting on Who God is, on what He has in store for His creation and on the fact that this same Holy God is your heavenly Father? I suspect that you might find yourself approaching God with a much greater confidence that He is mighty to assist you than if you simply cry out for help from the darkest throes of your immediate need, whatever that might be. A God-conscious approach to prayer will always prove more fruitful than a purely self-conscious approach.

In its proper sequence, "Give us today our daily bread" is more than just a plea for food. It is ...

I. A Prayer of Conviction

A. Our Father Is God from Whom All Things Flow

When some of the early teachers of the church studied *The Lord's Prayer*, they were so enthralled by its kingdom themes that they were uncomfortable believing that this petition for "daily bread" could be intended to touch on anything as unspiritual as what men physically ate. They remembered that Jesus called the Father's will "my bread." He referred to Himself as "the bread that came down from heaven." They spiritualized this petition so as to picture the disciple asking for all he needed of God's truth or of Jesus Himself to make it through the day.

That is an interesting take on "daily bread" by fulltime theologians, but in their pursuit of reverence they became impractical. No simple Galilean Jew listening to Jesus from that hillside on that day could have understood these words to mean anything like that. Besides, to over-spiritualize the prayer is no great compliment to God. He cares deeply about sustaining what He has created. Our daily bread is no small thing to Him. It never has been. The Old Testament psalmist recognized that God's provision for His creation is a measure of His glory:

¹⁵The eyes of all look to you,
and you give them their food at the proper time.
¹⁶You open your hand
and satisfy the desires of every living thing. – Psalm 145:15, 16

To ask God in prayer for something so basic as food reinforces Who He is just as it reinforces who we are not. As prideful rebels against God, we tend toward self-sufficiency, but the great humbling reality of the matter is that our need for God is absolute. Ultimately, what can any man do to create his own food? He can seed a field. He can water and care for that seeded field. He can harvest the crop. He can turn the crop into bread. Modern man knows much more about agricultural processes than did his ancient counterparts in Jesus' day. But, to this day, no man can produce a seed. Once that seed dies, no man can cause it to germinate into the new plant that yields a head of grain. Man cannot produce rain. He cannot control the sun. Ultimately, food is a remarkable gift.

A man at a post office was approached by an older fellow with a post card in his arthritic hand. The old man said, "Sir, could you address this for me?" The man gladly did so. He even wrote a short message on the post card and signed it for the man, too.

Then he asked the older man, "Now, is there anything else I can do for you?"

The old fellow thought about it for a minute, and added, "Yes, at the end could you just write, 'P.S. Please excuse the sloppy handwriting.'"

It's hard for a sinner to see anything through God's eyes, but I find it hard to imagine that he finds any sin in any man more annoying than the sin of ingratitude with its delusion of self-sufficiency.

B. This Is Not a Prayer of Presumption

Many of the poor in Jesus' day were day laborers. To feed themselves and their families, they went to the public square every morning to be hired on by whatever farmer, business owner or rich man had work to provide. They were paid at the end of each day they worked. To pray for "daily bread" was to pray for daily work. J.A. MacDonald accurately captured the ancient work ethic of the scripture when he wrote: "What we eat without labor is not our own bread."

To ask God to provide "our daily bread" is not to ignore our responsibility for producing it. When Adam was placed in the Garden, he was told "to work it and take care of it" (Genesis 2:15). Working, tending, nurturing, planning, working a strategy - these things reflect the image of our Creator in which we were fashioned. Work fell with the rest of creation. Because Adam sinned, God decreed that he must eat of the cursed ground through "painful toil" ... "By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food..." (Genesis 3:17, 18). But, the general notion of industriousness and of working for one's own sustenance is as much a part of nature as a sparkling mountain stream.

In Thessalonica, certain "signs-of-the-times-watchers" were checking out from the responsibilities of earning a living as they awaited the return of Jesus. Regarding these pious freeloaders, Paul wrote: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat." (II Thessalonians 3:10). It is neither harsh nor unchristian to expect people to do all they can to provide for themselves. The law of love demands that the church is to fill in the gaps for those struggling to make ends meet and to care for those simply unable to care for themselves, but it should never underwrite laziness. Christian charity should avoid every hint of stinginess, but it must also avoid the naiveté that breeds dependency.

II. A Prayer of Childlikeness

A. A Loving Father Knows our Needs

In contrast to those early teachers who spiritualized this petition, "Give us today our daily bread," Swiss theologian and Bible scholar Frederic Louis Godet brought it quite down to earth:

"In order to serve God, it is first of all necessary that we live ..."

I can only hope that no man really needs to be a theologian *OR* a Bible scholar to figure that one out. We cannot serve God if we're dead. Even if God did not particularly like us, He would still have a vested interest in feeding us, especially if He wants us to serve Him. Our body's have needs.

But, the testimony of Jesus is that God more than likes us. He loves us. He loves us to a point that he wants us to address Him as "Our Father in heaven." And, when Jesus made the Father known to us, He identified with us at the point of our smallest needs. Christ met us in a world of little things. The Son of God came to earth through a peasant mother, not a queen. His cradle was a manger.

During His public ministry, Jesus continued to care about the little matters of life. He was concerned with the hungry bellies of the multitudes that listened to Him as He spoke. On two occasions, He miraculously fed the crowds before sending them home. He even concerned Himself with one family's social embarrassment. They had run out of wine at a wedding feast, so Jesus intervened. And once, after a day of ministry so full that the disciples had not even had time to eat, Jesus said to them:

... "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest." - Mark 6:31

God has a breath-taking and eternal agenda for setting up His kingdom on earth. In the meantime, He is still your Father. He has not lost track of what you need in this life, nor does He consider those needs a small matter. He will not distantly ignore your cries over things you perceive to be urgent even though, in the vast scope of things, they probably are not. He cares for you; your emotional pain, your physical needs. He will respond to your cries conspicuously when that is appropriate, but He may choose to mold you into something stronger when that is more appropriate. In any event,

... ⁷Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. - 1 Peter 5:7

B. A Wise Father Understands Our Childish Ways

God invites us to give to Him all our cares and worries. This does not mean that He will indulge our every whim, but He is sympathetic to our every perceived hurt. Any of you who have had small children are well aware that tiny things can seem monumental to them. One of the most pitiful wails I ever heard from one of my own children was when, at about 18 months, a handful of *M & M's* got away and fell into a floor vent. The grief was poignant. The pain was shrill. I've taken trips to the dentist more pleasant than that.

As parents, we don't scold the small child because we expect the frame of reference to be childish. With the same empathy, God does not despise us for our childlike perspectives of what is important. However, neither does He necessarily rush out and replace our *M & M's*. Instead, He may patiently watch us grow to understand that some of our own perceived tragedies are not as earth-shattering as we first thought. Like any parent, God is sensitive to our perceived pain, but He will not indulge us in our demands if doing so is not in our best interest. That's just the nature of wise parenthood.

Even when we fail to ask God for our daily bread, He tends to provide it anyway. That should not surprise us, for our own children, especially small ones, don't seem to be too preoccupied with where their next meal will come from. There is a certain degree of "being taken for granted" that a parent lives with because of the social limitations of a child. Later, when that child does become old enough to ask for the things they prefer to eat, they seldom ask well or wisely. They may demand junk rather than sweetly ask for what is good. Parents bear with that, but as the years roll on, the parent will eventually grow disappointed if a child remains unable (or unwilling) to articulate gratitude to the parent or discern what is healthy from what is junk.

Parents welcome evidences that the kids are growing up. So does God. You'll probably continue to eat whether or not you ever acknowledge the heavenly Father as the source of life's basic provisions. But, you will never mature in your relationship with God if you never develop a habit of acknowledging Him as Provider, if you never develop the pattern of voicing your dependency on Him and, especially, if you never forge the practice of thanking Him for the blessings of life.

III. A Prayer of Contentment

A. Praying for "our Daily Bread" Relieves our Innate Self-absorption

Three shipwrecked survivors on a desert island had learned to make it together the best they could. One day, they discovered an old lamp. They rubbed it, and a genie appeared. He offered to grant a wish to each man. The first was a devoted family man. He wished to be restored to his wife and kids. "Poof!" His wish was granted. The second had been engaged before he had boarded that fateful vessel. He wished to be restored to the arms of his fiancée. "Poof!" It was done. The third man had no family, no successful business ventures and no fiancée. When pressed by the genie for his wish, he said, "Gee, I really miss my two buddies. I wish they were back here with me."

Note that Jesus teaches us to pray for "*our* daily bread," not "*my* daily bread." When we ask for "*our* daily bread," we are immediately forced to see ourselves in community with others. We must expand the scope of our prayers beyond our own interests. We begin to distinguish our wants from our needs as we take into consideration the situations of others who may have less than we do but who seem more grateful to God. We feel rightly awkward about asking God for more when, in fact, we should be sharing what we already have. When we are blessed by God, it is so that we might be a blessing to others. To receive blessing from the hand of God is to receive a mandate to share. How can I ask God to give me more personally when I come to Him as one child among many?

B. All We Really Require Is Daily Bread

The people who heard these words for the first time were Jews. Theirs was the legacy of the manna, that miracle food provided to their ancestors in the wilderness. Even after God had proven His willingness to provide for His nation, time and again, the people murmured against Moses as if they doubted that God knew that they had to eat. God sent manna. This manna fell from heaven daily and was to be gathered every morning. A family was to gather only what they needed for the day. It was not to be hoarded. Anything a family stockpiled beyond the daily requirement would be maggot-infested by the following morning. Twice the daily requirement for a family was to be gathered on the morning before the Sabbath, so that no gathering needed to be done on the Sabbath itself. The fact that this batch did not go bad just further evidenced God's ability to care for His people.

Just that we need, just when we need it. All we require is daily bread, but ...

C. What We Tend to Crave Is a Cushion

God's daily provision is a simple blessing that is lost on an affluent society where the mindset is to amass more and more. Not only do we amass wealth, we become so accustomed to living with surplus that we confuse surplus with need. A surplus is a luxury. The Old Testament speaks often to the wisdom of building up surpluses. But, if circumstances prohibit us from building up surpluses, we survive. And, if unforeseeable events cause surpluses to be depleted, the wise disciple thanks God for the fact that the surplus was available through the lean times. Joseph did not panic and fret as he watched the surpluses he had built up in Egypt for seven years become depleted during the seven years of famine. He saw that God had raised him up (as well as the surpluses) for that precise moment in time.

"Give us today our daily bread" is a prayer for our needs, not our greeds. It helps us to distinguish our needs from our wants. We *need* daily bread. We *want* surpluses. Planning is important. Setting something aside for leaner times is wise. But, simple trust in God is essential to the health of our spirits. No matter what a disciple passes through in this life, it is important that he remains firm in his conviction that God is still the God of our daily needs and still the Provider of "our daily bread."

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